



Fuller Theological Seminary  
**Digital Commons @ Fuller**

---

Doctor of Ministry Projects

School of Theology

---

9-2010

# Empowering Christian Witness at Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ through the Stories of Jesus

Jennifer J. Morgan

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fuller.edu/dmin>



Part of the [Missions and World Christianity Commons](#)

---

## Recommended Citation

Morgan, Jennifer J., "Empowering Christian Witness at Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ through the Stories of Jesus" (2010).  
*Doctor of Ministry Projects*. 22.  
<https://digitalcommons.fuller.edu/dmin/22>

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Theology at Digital Commons @ Fuller. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctor of Ministry Projects by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Fuller. For more information, please contact [archives@fuller.edu](mailto:archives@fuller.edu).

Please **HONOR** the copyright of  
these documents by not  
retransmitting or making any  
additional copies in any form

(Except for private personal use).

We appreciate your respectful  
cooperation.

---

Theological Research Exchange Network  
(TREN)

P.O. Box 30183  
Portland, Oregon 97294  
USA

Website: [www.tren.com](http://www.tren.com)  
E-mail: [rwjones@tren.com](mailto:rwjones@tren.com)  
Phone# 1-800-334-8736

---

ATTENTION CATALOGING LIBRARIANS  
**TREN ID#**

Online Computer Library Center (OCLC)  
**MARC Record #**

EMPOWERING CHRISTIAN WITNESS AT SIXTH AVENUE UNITED CHURCH OF  
CHRIST THROUGH THE STORIES OF JESUS

A MINISTRY FOCUS PAPER  
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF THE  
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY  
FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE  
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

JENNIFER L. MORGAN  
SEPTEMBER 2010



## ABSTRACT

### **Empowering Christian Witness at Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ through the Stories of Jesus**

Jennifer L. Morgan

Doctor of Ministry

School of Theology, Fuller Theological Seminary

2010

The purpose of this ministry focus paper is to offer a culturally appropriate, theologically formed strategy to empower lay people from Denver Colorado's Sixth Avenue UCC for a way-of-life approach to evangelism, informed by both the biblical narrative and personal stories.

Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ is a small, vibrant, growing congregation guided by a biblical, progressive, inclusive, liberal theology. The church leadership embrace a moderate to low Christology within an open and affirming environment. The congregation has had limited practices of evangelism, and this paper offers a plan for expanding Christian witness through Sixth Avenue.

The paper contains three major sections. The first outlines mission challenges embedded in the local context, beginning with a general overview and history of the national denomination and a description of the local congregation and surrounding community. Additionally, it explores the church's fears, hesitations, values, successes, failures, and celebrations around evangelistic efforts, past and present.

The second section describes the biblical and theological foundations—the platform for empowering lay Christian witness—guided by the stories and relational style of Jesus. The section begins with a review of nine books, then folds in theological reflection of six personal encounters Jesus had in his ministry, and proposes a theology of ministry for the church's future.

The third section provides a practical strategy for empowering lay Christians to engage actively and naturally in evangelism in their workplaces, families, communities, neighborhoods, and friendship circles. The strategy is delivered through small groups, and the essence of the strategy is developing skills for listening, storytelling, conversing, welcoming, and abiding in Christ. A plan for implementation, evaluation, and adaptation is also offered.

Content Reader: Richard Peace, PhD

Word Count: 300

To Kristy, a deeply rooted, fiercely loving, faithful follower of Jesus Christ,  
who constantly championed this project and served God by jumping into the fray  
of the Gospel with me and the United Church of Christ  
on the re-wrap journey of faith-sharing in the twenty-first century;  
in the hope that what is written here encourages and empowers God's dearly loved people  
to share the good news that all creation is being reclaimed joyfully by the risen Christ.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

|                       |     |
|-----------------------|-----|
| ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ..... | vii |
|-----------------------|-----|

|                    |   |
|--------------------|---|
| INTRODUCTION ..... | 1 |
|--------------------|---|

### PART ONE: MISSIONAL CHALLENGE/CONTEXT

#### Chapter

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 1. OVERVIEW OF SIXTH AVENUE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST<br>IN DENVER, COLORADO ..... | 13 |
|--|----|

History of the National Denomination

History of the Local Congregation

Ethos of Sixth Avenue

Values and Positive Ministry Practices

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 2. DESCRIPTION OF PAST AND PRESENT EVANGELISTIC<br>EFFORTS OF SIXTH AVENUE..... | 33 |
|---|----|

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

Fears and Hesitancies Related to Evangelism

Successes and Failures Related to Evangelism

Opportunities for Growth

Reasons for Celebration

Barriers to Christian Witness

### PART TWO: BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS, REFLECTIONS, AND DISCOVERIES

|  |    |
|--|----|
| 3. REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE FOR STRENGTHENING<br>THE EVANGELISM PRACTICES AT SIXTH AVENUE ..... | 54 |
|--|----|

*Mission in the Twenty-First Century*, edited by Andrew Walls  
and Cathy Ross

*Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism* by Walter Brueggemann

*Tell it Slant* by Eugene Peterson

*The Celtic Way of Evangelism* by George G. Hunter III

*The Authentic Witness* by C. Norman Kraus

*Unbinding the Gospel* by Martha Grace Reese

*Godbearing* by Elaine A. Robinson

*Conversion in the New Testament* by Richard V. Peace

*Stories with Intent* by Klyne R. Snodgrass

4. STORIES OF JESUS AS THE LEADING PARADIGM  
FOR WITNESSING ..... 79

Jesus in Conversation with a Lawyer in Luke 10:25-37

Jesus in Conversation with a Samaritan Woman in John 4:1-42

Jesus Heals Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52

Jesus Receives the Samaritan Leper in Luke 17:11-19

Jesus in Relationship with Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10

Jesus in Relationship with Nicodemus in John 3:1-21,  
7:40-52, and 19:38-42

Conclusion

5. A THEOLOGY OF EVANGELISM MINISTRY ..... 118

Re-imagining Evangelism

The Anchor: Abiding in Christ

Ten Shifts in Faith Sharing

The Role of the Pastor in Upholding a Theology of Evangelism

The Role of the Laity in the Ministry of Evangelism

Conclusion



### PART THREE: STRATEGY

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| 6. STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING LAY CHRISTIAN WITNESS<br>AT SIXTH AVENUE UCC .....                          | 135 |
| Small Group # 1 Topic: Listening Skills in John 4:1-26   |     |
| Small Group # 2 Topic: Conversation Skills in John 4:7-42  |     |
| Small Group # 3 Topic: Abiding in Christ in John 15:1-11   |     |
| Small Group # 4 Topic: Storytelling Skills in Luke 10:25-37  |     |
| Small Group # 5 Topic: Storytelling Skills in Luke 19:1-10   |     |
| Small Group # 6 Topic: Storytelling Skills in John 3, 7, and 19  |     |
| Small Group # 7 Topic: Welcoming Skills: Witness, Poverty, and<br>Conversion in Mark 10:46-62            |     |
| Small Group # 8 Topic: Welcoming Skills: Witness and<br>Care for Society's Marginalized in Luke 17:11-19 |     |
| 7. EVALUATION AND ADAPTATION .....   | 188 |
| Documentation of the Small Group Test Case   |     |
| Evaluation of the Field Test   |     |
| Adaptation Based on Accomplishments and Shortcomings   |     |
| Discovery of Trans-denominational Opportunities  |     |
| SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS .....  | 204 |
| APPENDICES .....   | 213 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY.....  | 228 |

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many wonderful people have supported this project in one way or another. First, I am delighted to have worked with my patient, wise, sensitive editor, Marylee Hull. She guided me through the adventure and it was a privilege to learn from her and to be served by her.

A word of appreciation to the Doctor of Ministry department at Fuller, especially John Hull for his encouragement after reading my proposal, and also to Julia, Matt, Doug, and Arlene whose kind words and help along the way enabled me to make it to the finish line.

Special thanks to Dr. Richard Peace who not only served as my advisor and reader, but was also used by God to re-shape my life-long calling into evangelism and leadership development, my connection to the United Church of Christ, and my experience of spiritual formation. Through his courses, his writing, and his affirmation, I have found a fresh vision for the Gospel.

I want also to thank the members of Sixth Avenue UCC in Denver and First Plymouth Congregational UCC in Englewood for the fact that they believed in me and stood by me. They offered their time, encouragement, friendship, mentoring, and prayer. There are far too many to name, but the steady support of Yvonne, Annabel, Bob, George, Andrea, Nancy, Pete, and Frank will be in my soul for a long time.

Gratitude goes to the friends who wrestled with the material on my behalf over many months including Carolyn and Kristy who read and carefully critiqued every word of the text more than once; Aram who consulted and pastored me through the process; Stu, Jim, Gary, Bob, Kristy, Yvonne, Tim, Ginny, and Jeana who lived through the strategy section for ten weeks. Their comments were very insightful and helped me keep it real.

Lastly and most importantly, I want to thank Jesus Christ for finding me. God's love for me, God's call on my life, and the privilege of ministering in the Kingdom of God are the gifts in this life for which I am most grateful. This project has been for me a spiritual discipline that resulted in deeper worship of the God whom I serve and love. Should this paper help the Church, I offer praise, gratitude, and honor to God, the Creator, Jesus Christ my redeemer, savior, and friend, and the Holy Spirit who joyfully gives and sustains all life.

## INTRODUCTION

Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ (Sixth Avenue) is a small, vibrant, growing congregation guided by a progressive, inclusive, biblical theology. The church leadership embraces a moderately high Christology and a tentative Trinitarian center, with strong leanings toward social concerns such as justice, poverty, and the environment. The church culture is widely welcoming, open, and affirming of all people. Although the national mission statement of the United Church of Christ (UCC) includes "...to participate in God's mission and to follow the way of the crucified and risen Christ,"<sup>1</sup> the local congregation at Sixth Avenue has engaged in too few practices of evangelism that fit within that stated mission. This paper offers a plan for expanding Christian witness in and through Sixth Avenue. Foundational to what follows are connections made between liberal and evangelical expressions of Christian faith, between evangelism and social justice/eco-justice, and between the beliefs Christ followers hold and the ways we actually live life.

Inherent in the ministry setting is the fact that the church and the writer make peculiar partners. My theological roots are strongly evangelical; therefore, committing to a liberal congregation symbolizes significant personal shifts. Connecting to the UCC mission statement, I feel called of God, in the context of my current ordination process with the United Church of Christ, to serve a bridge-building function between the good work of evangelism rooted in my past ministry experiences and a more integrated, holistic understanding of the gospel expressed in the denomination.

---

<sup>1</sup> United Church of Christ, "About Us," <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/> (accessed July 5, 2009).

For those who are proudly liberal or contentedly evangelical, evangelism means something totally different, and each group often tends toward distrust of the other.

Because Sixth Avenue is not immune from similar trust issues, the need to expand our understanding of conversion and evangelism is urgent.

Our suspicions of one another impede the real task of evangelism, which is to proclaim Christ to those who do not know his name or follow his way ... it would be wonderful if we looked upon one another less as enemies and more as people whose theological commitments are real, deep, and reasoned, even if we disagree with those reasons. Perhaps we could even learn to cooperate in outreach to those without faith traditions who are fascinated by the spiritual, and seeking to know God.<sup>2</sup>

Bridge building between the various forms of Christianity is necessary so that Christ followers from disparate segments of the Christian faith can be equipped to communicate clearly, humbly, compassionately, and authentically that the life-changing message of Jesus is actually good news for the entire world.

Newly discovered integration and bridge-building work emerges out of a transitional phase of my ministry following twenty-three years of leadership service with Youth for Christ (YFC). I ministered full-time in YFC with “lost”<sup>3</sup> teenagers in Chicago for twelve years and then as an executive leader at the organization’s national level for another dozen years. My work included teaching, writing, preaching, and strategic planning. The most significant and influential role I fulfilled in YFC was that of leading the organization’s shift in evangelism practices through “3Story Evangelism®.”<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup>Richard V. Peace, “Conflicting Understandings of Christian Conversion: A Missiological Challenge,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no.1 (January 2004): 12-13.

<sup>3</sup>YFC’s intention in using the term “lost” is to describe a human being who is disenfranchised from the local church as well as disinterested in the gospel to varying degrees.

<sup>4</sup>YFC formally defines 3Story Evangelism® in six youth ministry-related publications (2005, 2006, and 2007) as “a way of life that guides followers of Christ to BE good news while telling stories of

Stewarding the 3Story® way of life for YFC was a great privilege, and, because of it, my ministry interests evolved. I began the search for a deeper, fuller proclamation of the gospel where lay persons might be empowered “to establish and conduct conversations about Jesus and the gospel with people in the workplace,”<sup>5</sup> as well as the neighborhood, the ball field, the family reunion, and the local hardware store.

A transition out of YFC led me down many roads, all of which converge in the work of evangelism. During 2008, I ministered as a writer for Premier Global, a telecommunications company committed to holistic people development. The secular company, led by a new convert to Christianity, set out to train its people to be balanced, healthy, whole human beings whose lives include spiritual health along with professional productivity. I served within the training department of Premier Global, writing material that facilitated open ended spiritual discussions with biblical grounding. A second road on the journey out of YFC led me to be an adjunct professor at Colorado Christian University, where I taught evangelism to undergraduates using YFC’s 3Story Evangelism materials. During 2009, the most important road I walked in the bridge-building transition out of YFC and into evangelism in the UCC was to serve as the interim associate minister on the staff of First Plymouth Congregational UCC Church in

---

the good news.” 3Story® is YFC’s current ministry approach to reaching young people outside the scope and influence of the local church in the United States and around the world. 3Story describes the relational and theological intersections of three stories: God’s Story, My Story, and Their Story, and explores the integration of an abiding, intimate relationship with Jesus Christ and a story-focused model of evangelism. This writer served as the key author and editor of the six publications, as well as the “steward” of the ethos of 3Story, the primary national teacher, and the master teacher of teachers for the dissemination of the material around the world.

<sup>5</sup>Reggie McNeal, *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 131-132.

Englewood, Colorado, where I preached, taught, and served in a worship leadership capacity during the fall of 2009.

Close alignment with two UCC congregations provided two distinct places of experimental application for my final project. Sixth Avenue, the primary context in which the strategy in chapter 6 was executed, is the smaller of the two congregations and the location where I hold church membership, a position on the lay leadership team, and official in-discernment ordination candidate status. First Plymouth, a much larger church with a weekly attendance of about 350 adults and an official membership of approximately 900 adults, provided a second, temporary setting in which to test some of the evangelism strategy material from chapter 6. Working closely with the senior minister, the staff, and the council at First Plymouth allowed for a second rich experience in the UCC. While both churches were eager to learn and engage a new kind of evangelism, my assignment as interim at First Plymouth limited significantly any future ministry contact with the congregation. At Sixth Avenue, I partnered as a volunteer with the senior minister and the leadership team to execute and evaluate the project.

One companion bridge-builder on a similar journey of connecting common ground between liberals and evangelicals is Jim Wallis, CEO and Editor-in-chief for Sojourners Magazine. Wallis, who is reasonably trusted within UCC circles, challenges the conflicts between fundamentalist, dogmatically conservative, far-right versions of Christian faith and a “prophetic vision”<sup>6</sup> of faith, offering middle ground more likely to

---

<sup>6</sup>Jim Wallis, *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America* (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 183.

link Christ-centered “spiritual revival and social reform.”<sup>7</sup> Because he grounds so much of his work in the *imago Dei* imprinted on all human beings, along with a pursuit of what is good for all peoples, not just certain peoples, his approach validates the important concerns of the United Church of Christ. The UCC’s passion for marginalized people offers needed correction to the evangelical striving after heaven while ignoring creation and many of those who live on the earth. In the discovery of increasing common ground, I also find fresh expressions of Kingdom practices growing in my everyday life. For example, practices of “faithfulness before effectiveness”<sup>8</sup> resonate strongly with the UCC’s expression of ministry to the wider world outside the church.

Lydia Bean, a Harvard PhD candidate writing about the politics of evangelical identity, poses an important question related to the rediscovery of Jesus as an evangelist. “What does it look like to proclaim the gospel and invite people to follow Jesus in a way that leads to the work of justice?”<sup>9</sup> Bean suggests universally what I propose for a particular context: to bridge the gap between evangelism and social justice issues. Because neither the evangelical nor the liberal Christian perspective upholds the whole gospel, she believes that “the only way forward is to return over and over to the Bible with fresh eyes.”<sup>10</sup> I agree with Bean. A fresh eye on the Bible means it can be read as a book of mission to and for all people.

---

<sup>7</sup>Wallis, *The Great Awakening*, 18-19.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 66.

<sup>9</sup>Lydia Bean, “Bridging the Great Divide,” *Sojourners* 38, no. 3 (March 2009): 23-24.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 47.

The Bible tells the story of the loving, living Creator who draws near and listens attentively to the stories of human pain in the world where God walked as a human being. Jesus captured the hearts of first century people living in ancient Palestine. People listened to Jesus for a variety of reasons not the least of which was his startling humility and outrageous love. The Brazilian born Lutheran minister and author Dr. Valdir Steuernagel explains God's way of witnessing in the Exodus story as "a journey in which he comes down because he listens and cares deeply."<sup>11</sup>

Jesus witnessed to the grand narrative of God's story. Jesus witnessed as the storytelling, faith-sharing redeemer of all creation. Jesus witnessed to a simple paradigm for evangelism that empowered all followers of Christ to be good news, while telling stories of "the good news." Some Christians might not recognize Jesus as an evangelist, in part because evangelism has developed a darkened reputation within several expressions of the Church in the last decades of the twentieth century. Most of us who hope to witness lovingly to the good news that the realm of God is even now breaking through to the earth and redeeming all creation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ might not identify ourselves as evangelists doing the work of evangelism.

More than thirty years ago, at the age of sixteen, I stood transfixed behind the tympani in the back of the band room at Canon-McMillan High School in southwestern Pennsylvania and considered myself a good percussionist, but not an evangelist. The privilege of Christian witness, however, became deeply personal for me as I gazed into the faces of my friends and colleagues around the band room and for one life altering moment wondered if my friends had experienced the good news that the good God wants

---

<sup>11</sup>Andrew Walls and Kathy Ross, *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 71.



an intimate, enduring relationship with them? If they had not yet had such an experience, perhaps I could share my story with them and learn to listen to them as I thought Jesus listened to people. Since that frozen moment in time, God has directed me over and over to tell the story and to empower others to tell the story.

Telling the good news story that the world is being put right is at the heart of what follows. All of creation, including humanity, is being set right by the work of the Holy Spirit who ministers primarily through followers of Christ. Jesus breathes the Spirit into us and into the world. Putting the world right means Christians proclaim the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, and defend both creation and the poor. It means telling the story thoughtfully, with compelling connections, abundant compassion, and Jesus as the center of the proclaiming and the defending. The centrality of the lordship of Jesus Christ provides the grounding that God, in Christ, is calling the world into account so that creation flourishes as intended. The need to rediscover the stories of Jesus and the way Jesus listened has never been more apparent than at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

With storytelling and listening at the core of Christian witnessing, I hope as N. T. Wright does, to “get the story into their bones, resisting the potential shallowness of a fragmented gospel on either side.”<sup>12</sup> The strain and friction inherent in a fragmented gospel is evidenced in the clash between liberal and evangelical Christianity. Progress toward common ground is my hope for Sixth Avenue. Walter Brueggemann suggests that

---

<sup>12</sup>N. T. Wright, “A Church Shaped by Mission” (lectures, Fuller Theological Seminary, February 23-27, 2009).

evangelism is a “vexed and urgent subject”<sup>13</sup> in the Church today. The urgency he feels is “a multilayered and complex reality in the Church. For that reason it does not surprise us that there is no ready agreement among us on the meaning of evangelism, let alone consensus about strategies and procedures.”<sup>14</sup>

What follows pursues a fresh course of mission for Sixth Avenue proclaiming the gospel not only as the good news of salvation for all people, but also with a wider scope of service, social justice, and ecological concerns. In particular, leaders in the UCC share the burden of a more holistic grounding in the gospel. Integrating evangelism with a broader understanding of mission moves the Body of Christ far away from an aggressive, confrontational style of evangelism toward an approach that is compelled by story (both the biblical narrative as well as personal faith stories), focused through listening, based in conversation, centered in the ways Jesus interacted with people, and inspired by a deepened love for the grand narrative of God’s story.

Advancement toward a full mission oriented expression of the good news requires progress away from incomplete views of the gospel and deficient ways to proclaim the gospel. I hope to expand my own perspective and to offer a renewed narrative bolstering Sixth Avenue’s witness to the good news. Normative evangelical strategies and Sixth Avenue’s current praxis have not yet satisfactorily embraced the holistic message of Jesus Christ. Sixth Avenue’s outward, compassionate focus on a world in need of loving service and faithful stewardship is strong. Yet, connection to the Kingdom proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ frightens many in the church.

---

<sup>13</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 13.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 7.

Speaking broadly from the liberal side, Sixth Avenue focuses on the Gospels and the ministry activities of Jesus that result in feeding the hungry, caring for creation, and housing the homeless. This is in line with the task of the Church “to implement the achievement of Jesus Christ”<sup>15</sup> but lacks thorough inclusion of his life, death, and resurrection. This gospel produces an incomplete representation of God’s grand narrative. On the evangelical side, the Church focuses on the writings and ministry of Paul primarily related to issues of sin, death, resurrection, and heaven, telling the story about God’s work on the cross, but neglecting the work of the Church to enact the accomplishment of Jesus Christ’s death and resurrection. It is time to proclaim the fullness of the very good, good news, the glad tidings of εὐαγγέλιον at Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ and in all the world.

What follows is an attempt to integrate the Kingdom proclamation of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ with social justice, the stewardship of the earth, and service at Sixth Avenue. Striving to inspire holistic missional thinking in the congregation, I contend that this integration is a more full measure of the gospel. The proclaiming of the gospel to every creature in heaven and on earth has radical, paradigm-shifting implications, not only for Sixth Avenue, but also for other liberal and evangelical churches that wish to claim the preeminent name of the Lord Jesus Christ. As Colossians 1:23 reminds us, “There is no other Message—just this one. Every creature under heaven gets this same Message” (Col. 1:23 *The Message*).

One critical theological issue will be left unattended, that of sexual orientation. The UCC is the first distinctly Christian denomination to ordain openly gay, partnered

---

<sup>15</sup>Bean, “Bridging the Great Divide,” 47.

leaders. While not an issue to be tackled in this ministry focus paper, I acknowledge that a theology of sexuality focused on matters of sexual orientation and gender identity are of significant importance for the twenty-first century church, liberal or evangelical. Our need to address the conversation in the most Christ-like, theologically generous fashion cannot be overstated, in part because the gay issue is a subset of the larger category of questions related to what it means to be human. These include the ethics of stem cell research, complications surrounding the abortion debate, and “GLBTQ”<sup>16</sup> questions. While very important, these do not fall within the scope of my current work.

Life-long friends from the conservative, evangelical tradition may determine my work dangerously unorthodox because I intentionally do not confront the issue, while new friends in the United Church of Christ may judge me disloyal for insinuating that GLBTQ is an unsettled theological issue. I choose to live in this tension. I hope and pray that solid bridges are built for the sake of the good news that Jesus Christ has come for all of humanity. At stake is the health and beauty of the Church and the glory of God in the twenty-first-century expression of the church at Sixth Avenue. Having named what will not be tackled, the paper is organized within the following structure.

Part One outlines the mission challenges embedded in the local context, beginning with a general overview and history of the national denomination, the local congregation at Denver’s Sixth Avenue UCC, and the surrounding community. Additionally, fears, hesitations, successes, failures, opportunities for growth and celebration, and barriers surrounding witnessing efforts are explored in the past and present life of the church. Chapters 1 and 2 are sourced by personal survey interviews conducted by the writer in

---

<sup>16</sup>GLBTQ is the acronym representing people who consider themselves gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their sexual orientation.

one-on-one settings with 20 percent of the current church members whose histories at Sixth Avenue range from twelve months to seventy-five years. The interviewees include the current pastor, as well as members of the current and prior leadership teams. Many of the responses are paraphrased with the exception of the noted quotations, which use the exact words of those surveyed.

Part Two describes the biblical and theological foundations that serve as the platform for empowering lay Christian witness guided by the stories of Jesus and his style of relating to people. This section outlines three general categories of theological discovery. Beginning with a literature review of nine relevant books, the conversation about evangelism practices at Sixth Avenue is expanded. Second, biblical reflection about six personal encounters Jesus had in his ministry lays the foundation for Christian witnessing. The third category of theological discussion is a proposed theology of evangelism ministry for Sixth Avenue.

Part Three provides a practical strategy for empowering lay Christians to engage actively and naturally in faith sharing in their work places, families, communities, neighborhoods, and friendship circles. This section champions a listening-focused, conversation-based, story-centered, welcoming style of witness patterned after the life of Jesus Christ in the New Testament. The heart and soul of the strategy is the development of skills for living a way of life guided by the ways Jesus encountered and interacted with not-yet-believing people. The strategy is delivered through a series of small groups. A vision is cast for Sixth Avenue's movement into the future, empowered as a community for holistic Christian witness in the world. A thorough evaluation and possible adaptations are also offered.

Turning attention now to the history of the United Church of Christ as a national denomination, the local congregation at Sixth Avenue, and the surrounding Denver community, chapter 1 examines the mission challenges formed by the church's history, ethos, and ministry praxis. As part of the important mission for which the church exists, partner ministries and collaborative community practices engaged by Sixth Avenue in Denver's Capital Hill area are also described.

PART ONE  
MISSIONAL CHALLENGE/CONTEXT

CHAPTER 1  
OVERVIEW OF SIXTH AVENUE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST  
IN DENVER, COLORADO

Denver's Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ is one of twenty-eight churches, approximately seventy clergy, and five thousand participating laypersons in the Metropolitan Denver Association of the Rocky Mountain Conference. The conference "is a faith community of over eighty UCC congregations in Colorado, Utah, and Wyoming who support and nurture one another in local and wider ministry and mission, in the name of Jesus Christ."<sup>17</sup> The conference is aligned with the UCC as an "open and welcoming denomination that proclaims the Gospel of Jesus Christ, celebrates diversity, honors the gifts of all people, and seeks justice and peace for all."<sup>18</sup>

**History of the National Denomination**

The story of the United Church of Christ narrates the journey of Christians serving God through the church and pursuing unity within rich diversity. The UCC was

---

<sup>17</sup>"Welcome to the Rocky Mountain United Church of Christ," <http://www.rmucc.org/index.htm> (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

officially founded June 25, 1957 “as a community of faith seeking to respond to the gospel of Jesus Christ in word and deed.”<sup>19</sup> Beginning in 1620 on the shores of the new world, four Christian streams flowed together by 1934 to form two larger bodies that twenty-three years later would merge together as the United Church of Christ. The largest of the four bodies was the Congregational Church, which united with the Christian Churches in 1931. The German Reformed Church of the United States along with the German Evangelical Synod in North America came together in 1934 to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church. Other smaller streams joined the developing denomination including German Evangelical Protestants (1782 in Pittsburgh), Hungarian Reformed churches (1852, now known as the Calvin Synod of small churches scattered throughout the north eastern and Midwestern United States), Congregational Methodists (1852), Japanese American Congregationalists (1874), and later American Indians, Chinese Congregationalists, and more than a dozen Latino Americans churches (1990s).

The new diverse denomination formed around a commitment to visible church unity locally, regionally, nationally, and internationally as well as a strong Christology. “The two companies of Christians have held and hold the same belief that Christ and Christ alone is Head of the Church. From him derive the understanding of God as Father, the participation of the same Spirit, the doctrines of faith.... To be drawn to him is to be drawn to one another, and to acknowledge him as head is to feel pain in dismemberment one from the other ....”<sup>20</sup> From the beginning of its history, the church “affirmed the ideal

---

<sup>19</sup>United Church of Christ, “About Us.”

<sup>20</sup>Barbara Brown Zikmund, series editor, *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 1998), 519.



that Christians did not always have to agree to live together in communion. That they may all be one, is Jesus' prayer for the unity of the church."<sup>21</sup>

The national denomination refers to itself as liberal and strives to follow the way of Jesus Christ. Congregations are generally liturgical, organized congregationally with high autonomy, and recognize two sacraments: baptism and the Lord's Supper. Referring to the four early streams of the denomination, the recent past president of the UCC describes the church as continuing to exist as "evangelical, congregational, reformed, and Christian."<sup>22</sup> The national website affirms the Trinitarian nature of God, the belief that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of human beings, and trust in "the presence and power of the Holy Spirit to prosper [the church's] creative and redemptive work in the world."<sup>23</sup>

From the preamble of the church constitution, the UCC "claims as its own the faith of the historic Church expressed in the ancient creeds and reclaimed in the basic insights of the Protestant Reformers, and looks to the Word of God in the Scriptures."<sup>24</sup> The UCC hears God calling the denomination to be a united and uniting church with a prophetic voice in the world, specifically in areas of peace and justice. Of the approximately 5,600 congregations comprised of 1.2 million members, the UCC takes

---

<sup>21</sup>United Church of Christ, "About Us."

<sup>22</sup>John H. Thomas, General Minister and President, United Church of Christ, "Our Core Identity," June 20, 2004, <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/our-core-identity.html>. Specifically, Reverend Thomas said, "Evangelical suggests...personal encounter with the gospel. Congregational reminds us of the centrality of the local church for discipleship and mission. Reformed teaches us that church and society are subject to sin and must therefore be reshaped by the prophetic word. Christian connects us to those who cherish the simplicity of a commitment to Jesus who invites all to the Table .... These distinctive gifts mark our unique contribution to Christian witness in the world. But even more ... through this church we have received our inheritance with all others who are one in Jesus Christ."

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>United Church of Christ, "Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ," <http://www.ucc.org/about-us/constitution-of-the-ucc.html> (accessed July 5, 2009).

joy in being a “progressive denomination that unabashedly engages heart and mind.”<sup>25</sup>

The denomination abides on a middle ground of theological and missional tension, acknowledging the importance of a plurality of Christian understandings. One UCC historian and pastor summarizes the denomination as “not dogmatically systematized and also not indifferently inclusive.”<sup>26</sup>

Missional concerns at the national level of the UCC fall within the framework of *missio Dei*, implying that “a theology of mission precedes a theology of the church. Ecclesiology defines and orders the church for mission.”<sup>27</sup> David Bosch explains mission as “not primarily an activity of the Church, but an attribute of God ... a movement from God to the world ... The Church is there because there is mission, not vice versa.”<sup>28</sup> The UCC perceives God’s mission in the world as concern for human salvation but much more as well. Embracing *missio Dei* includes “the entire task for which the Church is sent into the world.”<sup>29</sup> Lesslie Newbigin adds that

Mission is not first of all an action of ours. It is an action of God, the triune God, of God the Father who is ceaselessly at work in all creation and in the hearts and minds of all human beings ... graciously guiding human history toward its true end; of God the Son who has become part of the created history in the incarnation; and of God, the Holy Spirit who is given as a foretaste of the end to empower and teach us ....<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup>United Church of Christ, “About Us.”

<sup>26</sup>Randi Jones Walker, *The Evolution of a UCC Style* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 2005), 77.

<sup>27</sup>“Report on Restructure,” in “A Mission Framework for the General Synod Committee on Structure” (proposal, Cleveland, 1992), E-2.

<sup>28</sup>David Bosch, *Transforming Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991), 390, quoted in *A Mission Framework*, E-2.

<sup>29</sup>Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 121.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 135.

In the 2007 revised edition of *Theology and Identity*, editors Johnson and Hambrick-Stowe prophetically declare for the twenty-first century church that this will be “the great catholic century [wherein] the church will begin to assume its rightful nature and be the body of Christ united and whole.”<sup>31</sup> They remind followers of Christ, “the church must always be catholic, evangelical, reformed, and apostolic.”<sup>32</sup> Into this hopeful vision Sixth Avenue locates itself with gospel passion, broad diversity, and active love. Positioning myself proudly within Sixth Avenue and invigorated with all the energy Jesus so powerfully works in me, I strenuously contend (Col. 1:28–29) for the goal that all things in heaven and on earth will be reconciled back to the one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things came into being and through whom we live (1 Cor. 8:6).

### **History of the Local Congregation**

#### **Social and Geographic Factors**

The local congregation of Sixth Avenue UCC has a rich and varied Christian history in Denver, Colorado, spanning almost 125 years since 1887. The church grew out of a strong congregational identity celebrating Pilgrim and early American roots with pride. Originally the church was located in “Hammond Village,” which was chosen for the convenience that the end of the street car line and the edge of several large dairy farms offered the surrounding community. A classic neighborhood church, it had no need for a parking lot because most people walked to the building.

---

<sup>31</sup>Daniel L. Johnson and Charles Hambrick-Stowe, eds., *Theology and Identity: Movements and Polity in the United Christ of Christ* (Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 2007), 23.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

Located in the Congress Park neighborhood on the north edge of North Cherry Creek, in the section of Denver known as Capitol Hill, the area was transformed between 1900 and 1930 by new park and recreational facilities. A historical desire for “racial, ethnic, lifestyle, family structure, education, and generational diversity”<sup>33</sup> has provided ample motivation to preserve affordable housing and decrease homelessness in the neighborhood.

Capitol Hill is one of the oldest residential areas in Denver. During World War II, Capitol Hill provided rooms and apartments to people who could not find housing elsewhere. After 1955, inflated real estate values caused by the neighborhood’s close proximity within walking distance to downtown Denver accelerated a trend of disappearing single-family homes.<sup>34</sup> Today, fewer than 4 percent of the structures in Capitol Hill are single-family units, 22 percent of all units are converted homes or small apartment buildings, and almost 75 percent are large apartment buildings or complexes. Overall population density in Capitol Hill is now the highest in the city.<sup>35</sup> Economically, the ministry setting defined by a five mile radius around the church includes a significant amount of extreme wealth, primarily south of the church, plus a variety of middle class people, and a large and growing population of the struggling poor.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup>Percept Group, Inc., Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Information from The Piton Foundation, *The City and County of Denver*, 2007, Copyright 2007, [http://piton.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=CommunityFacts.Summary&Neighborhood\\_ID=868](http://piton.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=CommunityFacts.Summary&Neighborhood_ID=868) (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>36</sup>Reverend Ed Hawley, retired pastor, interviews by the author, May 2009.

### Partner Ministries

Two significant local ministry efforts of Sixth Avenue are partnerships with Capital Hill United Ministries (CHUM) and the Denver Inner City Parish (DICP), both of whom collaborate successfully to care for Denver's marginalized populations. "CHUM is a consortium of churches and service institutions in the Capitol Hill area of Denver, dedicated to formalizing the cooperation of member churches, associated agencies, and associate members in order to address the spiritual and physical needs of the community."<sup>37</sup> Pastor Dan Geslin serves as an official member of the CHUM interfaith coalition and retired clergy and faithful Sixth Avenue member, Pastor Ed Hawley, serves on the board. Formed in 1985 to unify the teamwork of Capitol Hill clergy, CHUM continues to focus on issues of hunger, homelessness, chronic mental illness, and the AIDS crisis. Denominations represented included: Methodist, Baptist, Roman Catholic, Episcopal, Unitarian, Presbyterian, and Lutheran.

The Denver Inner City Parish is "a nondenominational, non-profit agency dedicated to serving the secular and spiritual needs of west Denver's low-income community ... offering a 'familia' model of support that provides holistic, 'wrap-around' educational and human services, which develop self-sufficiency for people of all ages."<sup>38</sup> Strengthening the community is the highest value of DICP, where they seek to serve needy, low-income residents. Their work meets the basic human needs of disadvantaged people, primarily, though not exclusively, from the Latino community. Since 1960, DICP

---

<sup>37</sup>Capitol Hill United Ministries, "History," [http://www.chumdenver.com/about\\_us.html](http://www.chumdenver.com/about_us.html) (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>38</sup>Denver Inner City Parish, <http://www.dicp.org/> (accessed July 5, 2009).

has been successfully “strengthening families, enhancing community spirit, and fostering hope through education.”<sup>39</sup>

Sixth Avenue has been affiliated enthusiastically with CHUM and DICP for more than twenty years. Currently the church’s growth and stability is leading to potential increases in acts of loving service to marginalized people through these and other local community collaborations. Expanding the vision of the “Wider Church Ministry Team”<sup>40</sup> is creating a renewed sense of mission, outreach, and lay involvement at Sixth Avenue on behalf of the wider community.

#### Pastors at Sixth Avenue

The first pastor remembered by many in the congregation is Pastor J.,<sup>41</sup> who served from the late 1960s through the late 1980s and was the last of a one-hundred-year, unbroken line of long-term pastors. The congregation was large during this season of ministry with an extensive Sunday school program, following in the tradition that founded the church, a Sunday school organized for children by the women of the community. The neighborhood changed radically during Pastor J.’s ministry. People moved to the suburbs as their kids grew up and left home. The common bond uniting the church during Pastor J.’s tenure was to provide support for parenting children and teenagers. The mission during this era lacked a center in Jesus Christ. During this time,

---

<sup>39</sup>Denver Inner City Parish, <http://www.dicp.org/> (accessed July 5, 2009).

<sup>40</sup>During 2009–2010, this writer is the leader of the outreach efforts represented in Sixth Avenue UCC’s Wider Church Ministry Team: championing and serving those in need outside the church. A church vision is currently being developed that this paper will be used to enhance and inform.

<sup>41</sup>The specific identities of former pastors and church staff members are abbreviated with one letter because permission to use full names could not be secured for all of the former staff members. The only exception is the current pastor, serving during the time of this writing, Reverend Doctor Dan Geslin.

the parsonage was sold, and the church lived off the income from the property for more than twenty years. In the 1970s, the average attendee at Sixth Avenue did not recognize whether the theology of the church was liberal or conservative, but many committed families had worshiped on the corner of Adams and Sixth for three generations or more.<sup>42</sup>

In 1988, tension surrounding Pastor J.'s ministry began to build. He visited Nicaragua where he encountered Liberation Theology and brought its concepts back to Sixth Avenue. Most of the congregation was not prepared for the implications of a new theological center. He also wanted to buy some land to build a parking lot in order to prepare for growth and change in the community, but the congregation refused to accept his vision of the future. Pastor J. was well loved and perceived as a good preacher who was warm, kind, and supportive. In 1989, he left suddenly under a cloud of mystery. Typical for mainline denominations during this period of American history, the church was full with the parents of baby-boomers and continued to be less and less Christian in orientation, though a few remained who wanted to expose their families to issues of faith in God and in Jesus Christ.

Major controversy broiled at Sixth Avenue between 1989 and 2005. By the turn of the century, the Rocky Mountain Conference of the UCC suggested shutting down the church, which the conference referred to as a "pastor killer." This period of history continued the shift away from the church's primary identity in Jesus Christ. Worry about being torn apart and the desperate concern that they were dying drove the congregation to an unhealthy atmosphere of unresolved conflict as well as unsettling personal and

---

<sup>42</sup>This chapter is primarily sourced by survey interviews of twenty percent of the current Sixth Avenue UCC members whose histories range from twelve months to seventy-five years. The interviewees include the current pastor, as well as members of the current and prior leadership teams. Many responses are paraphrased with the exception of the noted quotations, which use the exact words of those surveyed.

corporate pain. During this tumultuous time, the church was served by seven pastors: four interims and three called pastors, four men and three women.

In the middle of these days of turmoil, the church's fast decline slowed for a short season under the leadership of Pastor D., a vital, young, energetic minister, and later Pastor S., a gifted preacher and solid pastoral care minister, and Pastor W. who had a reputation for pounding the pulpit. Most notably, Pastor H. served an important nine-month interim in 1989 before his sudden death caused by a brain aneurism. A warm, friendly, former Methodist minister and evangelist, he encouraged church membership, provided a high level of energy, and was remembered as a great preacher and a man filled with the Spirit. He was enthusiastically welcoming and came to the UCC because he wanted to pastor a community where women and gays could be fully embraced and ordained.

Two other former pastors, Pastor E. and Pastor J., each served eighteen month ministries at Sixth Avenue. Under their watches, the church dwindled down to fifteen members. The period 2001 to 2004 is remembered as the "nightmare" season in the church's history. Survey respondents with first-hand experience refer to these times as "abusive, angry, damaging, scandalizing days when the church and the people were wrecked." Amidst the storms, people left, leaders from the association and the conference got involved, "friendships were destroyed, and faith was shattered." The church continued living off of endowment income and the sale of the parsonage and had very little sense of mission, outreach, or service. Paranoid power bases among staff members solidified an ingrown, protective community. The church felt desperate because of constant fighting between pastors and people. Worship services had been reduced to



announcing social justice programs, periods of silence following a struck gong, and pastoral prayers resembling a list of political concerns. Looking back, some feel that Christ was all but removed from the life of the church. Into this field of ministry the current pastor, Dan Geslin landed safely in 2005 and began the difficult work of rebuilding a Christian church.

Recent history of Sixth Avenue extends from 2005 through the present under the leadership of Pastor Dan. He has served as an ordained UCC minister for twenty years, following a transition out of the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America's (ELCA) ordination process due to the fact that the ELCA refused to ordain openly gay people. He then transferred from the Lutheran Seminary in Berkeley, California, to the Pacific School of Religion and affiliated with the UCC. After successfully starting two UCC churches in the Midwest, he was called to Sixth Avenue while earning his Doctor of Ministry in preaching from Iliff Theological Seminary. Of the many transformative changes initiated by Pastor Dan, a liturgical worship service committed to the lectionary and the preaching of the Gospel of Jesus Christ stand out as beacons on Sixth and Adams in Denver.

### **Ethos of Sixth Avenue**

The eclectic nature of the congregation is profound. Mostly college graduates, many also have earned graduate degrees, including a number of doctorates. There are 125 committed members, and approximately 60 attend the weekly worship service. Generationally, the congregation is equally represented by one-third retired, one-third middle aged, and one-third less than forty years of age. Half of the people are male and half are female; one-third is gay and two-thirds are not. One faithful member remembers

wanting to add spirituality to his life. “I wanted to grow closer to God. I was feeling lost and needing direction and purpose. I wanted to learn about the Bible and Jesus Christ. I was also looking for a church that was open to gay people, but I did not want a gay church.” The congregation includes six African American members. The current and much loved music director of the past two years defines himself as a “recovering evangelical” who has attended Sixth Avenue for ten years. He assesses the church as having “a history that created a sense of roots and positive longevity in the community. The church feels good when you walk in. I hear the Holy Spirit here. I was raised to listen to the Spirit.”

The diversity of faith traditions includes Roman Catholics, Methodists, Mennonites, Episcopalians, Anglicans, Evangelicals, Presbyterians, Buddhists, New Age people, and ten percent who have a UCC background. Some from the UCC come out of the Evangelical/Reformed side of the church merger, with the majority having roots in the Congregational/Christian segment of the denomination. The church is also represented by a great diversity of backgrounds in spiritual leadership seen in the context of twenty members who are retired or current clergy, or seminarians. Varying in theological grounding from Unitarian to Trinitarian, from Agnosticism to a high Christology, from process to evangelical to feminist theology, many of the clergy have served for decades within the Rocky Mountain Conference and in the Denver Association of the UCC. Four of the retired clergy members were present at the 1957 uniting synod.

Common threads knit the congregation together. First is the desire to welcome marginalized people and provide a Christian community to explore eclectic theological positions. Second, Sixth Avenue attracts people who have been wounded by former

church experiences. This damage drew many away from other denominations and away from God. Sixth Avenue provides a safe haven for people who are reconsidering and rediscovering God, the Church, the Bible, and spirituality. From the pragmatic standpoint of a parking lot-less church positioned just outside the city, many attend because the location of the church is within walking distance of their homes. The people are eager to move ahead and be the Body of Christ to one another and to the world outside the church building. For example, several long-term Sixth Avenue members remain committed to active, loving service among the poor.

### Mission

The current pastor and leadership team are shaping the mission, vision, and ethos of Sixth Avenue in significant ways. Pastor Dan comfortably articulates the mission of the church as “*being* the good news of what God has done for us through Jesus Christ [on behalf of] people who are alienated from the Church or who have no church background.”<sup>43</sup> Pastor Dan’s elected leaders use similar language when they describe the mission of the church in relation to getting the good news out into the world and being a light so that people can see the love and the community of Christ. Showing Christ’s love “as revealed to us in the Word of God, the scriptures, the Bible, and through the Spirit moving us to be a community,”<sup>44</sup> shines brightly from the church leaders. For the purpose of this paper, mission defines and organizes the life of a church, answering questions of existence and focusing on the purposes of God in people, in the world, and through

---

<sup>43</sup>Interviews with Pastor Dan Geslin during June 2009.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

people. “In other words, the church’s true and authentic organizing principle is mission ... the mission of God flows directly through every believer and every community of faith that adheres to Jesus.”<sup>45</sup>

Some previous lay leaders voice caution concerning the importance of the mission, reminding the church that if mission deteriorates, the church will become ingrown, insular, closed off from the world, or centered on self. Concerns about diversity, inclusivity, and being welcoming are in the forefront of many minds at Sixth Avenue. The weekly bulletin provides insight about these missional cautions.

We are a community of God’s people, worshiping, welcoming all and serving in the spirit of Christ. As part of the Capitol Hill United Ministries, we reach out in love to our neighborhood and our city. As part of the UCC, we seek justice and serve the wider world. As an Open and Affirming congregation, we celebrate our wonderful diversity in sexual orientation, race, class, gender identity, physical abilities, and age.<sup>46</sup>

The common congregational articulation of Sixth Avenue’s purpose is “to learn about Jesus Christ, to live his example, and to grow into a faith community so that we can do more for each other and for the world around us.”<sup>47</sup> The importance of community in mission cannot be understated as the congregation seeks to make Christ visible while proclaiming the love of God to neighbors and to the world. Other words people employed in the survey to describe mission include “hospitality, inclusiveness, and service to the world far and near, providing spiritual guidance and care, and doing social justice as a function of being in the realm of God.” More than a few people believe that the mission

---

<sup>45</sup> Alan Hirsch, *The Forgotten Ways, Reactivating the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2006), 284-285.

<sup>46</sup> Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ’s welcome from the back of the bulletin by Pastor Dan Geslin, 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

of the church is “to proclaim Christ in word and deed and to make Jesus following disciples.”

### Vision

Vision is more difficult for people to articulate at Sixth Avenue, with the exception of the pastor. Pastor Dan feels a special, personal calling to serve educated people. The content of his preaching is biblically substantive and intellectual in focus as he serves those in the pews. Part of his vision is for “the church to grow into a theologizing community.”<sup>48</sup> He has further vision to see more children and more young adults in the life of the church and “to empower more lay folks for the work of the Church.”<sup>49</sup> At the heart of his vision are two themes. First, the pastor believes the experience of worship to be core to the community. Second is a deep trust and belief that the Spirit is at work in the church. Philosophically, growth for Pastor Dan is more organic than strategic. The empowering of people to do the work of the mission of God comes from the Spirit. “Worship leads to growth and growth is about the Holy Spirit, which cannot be controlled or contrived.”<sup>50</sup> In other words, Dan envisions the gifts that exist in the Body of Christ are first placed there in people by the Spirit and then “teased out through worship.”<sup>51</sup>

For many church members, the vision of Sixth Avenue is at best fuzzy. Some are desirous of a vision-defining process that might bring clarity to the question of who Sixth

---

<sup>48</sup>Interviews with Pastor Dan Geslin during June 2009.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

Avenue could become in the future. If, as John P. Kotter writes, “Vision refers to a picture of the future with some implicit or explicit commentary on why people should strive to create that future,”<sup>52</sup> the community at Sixth Avenue is in need of vision casting. The simple sense that “God loves people just the way they are” is at the heart of the developing vision people struggle to put into words. One member believes that knowing God and “assisting God in God’s work in the world” is the vision. Brian, the former moderator, is passionate about his understanding of vision. “Can you imagine what the world would be like if we all lived like Christ? Love and community are at the heart of the vision of who we want to become.” One other member addressed the vision of Sixth Avenue as becoming “an active, inclusive Christian community that inspires Christian people to follow the gospel in the church and outside the church.”

The church is clear about the central, defining cultural realities at Sixth Avenue. The pastor, lay leaders, and congregants consistently describe the church ethos using phrases such as “trans-generational; tangible support for others; love and genuine care for the community within the church; finding a larger God; caring, eclectic, family oriented, friendly, open, welcoming, and supportive; free thinking; people can be who they are; a strong interest in learning (especially from Pastor Dan’s sermons); open to discussion, dialogue, and sincere interest in other people’s opinions; people in general are approachable, caring, and hospitable; undercurrents of progressive Christianity; the feeling of reconnecting people who have been hurt by other churches.”<sup>53</sup> One beautifully faithful member who has been in the church for seventy-two years reports that we “are in

---

<sup>52</sup>John P. Kotter, *Leading Change* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 68.

<sup>53</sup>Survey conclusions are drawn from interviews with church members during May and June, 2009.

existence because people need a place to really feel like they are close to God and Jesus and it has to do with the building; it is a special place.”

### Theological Tensions

Astute members speak of tension in the church’s theology. Concerning the broad welcome of the UCC, some members want to maintain openness to all spiritual paths, a form of ecumenical inclusivity, while simultaneously focusing on “real life community together with Jesus and each other.” Many members believe that Sixth Avenue is about being “Christian followers of Jesus, saying yes to Jesus and in every way saying yes to people whose walks and lives are vastly different theologically. It’s more than respect.” The tension inherent in being inclusive and following the way of Jesus is theological for many of the people interviewed. The denomination’s declaration that the Church has no leader except Jesus Christ helps the congregation maintain an essential focus without excluding anyone, though it does not completely resolve the tension between practices of expansive welcome and solid grounding in Jesus Christ

Concerning progressive versus evangelical theology, among those surveyed, more than half felt “personally perturbed,” “frustrated,” or “upset by regular posturing against conservative evangelicalism from the pulpit.” A few who so state their annoyances also align themselves as evangelical; however, the vast majority do not agree with a more evangelical position. In fairness to the story of the congregation, the divide between progressive and evangelical is enormous at Sixth Avenue. Admittedly in process, the church members are generally open to bridging the fissures between progressive and evangelical theological positions.

### **Values and Positive Ministry Practices**

The people at Sixth Avenue speak consistently about how critical it is to reveal God's love through service to the community. With tears in their eyes, several members recall that "we are forgiven and always welcome, unconditionally." Everyone is welcome, not just the people who are presently involved, but anyone who shows up. From lay persons' theological perspectives, welcoming is the word most used to describe an important belief about God and, therefore, about the community of those who follow Jesus Christ. Frequently, words like "open and affirming"<sup>54</sup> and tolerant are used to further define the wide welcome of the UCC. "Inclusivity" is used in tandem with welcoming, open, and affirming as key theological concepts at Sixth Avenue.

Many survey respondents reference the pastor and his sermons when they discuss values. Many assert that an emphasis on God's unconditional love and grace for all humanity and all creation, in opposition to law and judgment, prevails over all other theological issues. Pastor Dan's theology is consistently referred to as Christ-focused, inclusive of gay and lesbian people, and centered in the stories of Jesus Christ in the Bible. Pastor Dan's intellectual style of preaching "proclaims the two-way covenant between us and God as well as between us and each other." The use of "expansive images of God as the Trinity, with a keen focus on the humanity of Christ without

---

<sup>54</sup>Adopted by the Fifteenth General Synod, United Church of Christ, Ames, Iowa, June 28-July 2, 1985 by a Majority Vote of 98%, the United Church of Christ resolved to call all congregations to declare themselves Open and Affirming. The resolution included the biblical call that Christians are "to love our neighbors as ourselves, that we are called to act as agents of reconciliation and wholeness within the world and within the church itself. We know that lesbian, gay and bisexual people are often scorned by the church, and devalued and discriminated against both in the church and in society. We commit ourselves to caring and concern ... and we join together as a covenantal community, to celebrate and share our common communion and the reassurance that we are indeed created by God, reconciled by Christ and empowered by the grace of the Holy Spirit." <http://www.ucc.org/assets/pdfs/1985-CALLING-ON-UNITED-CHURCH-OF-CHRIST-CONGREGATIONS-TO-DECLARE-THEMSELVES-OPEN-AND-AFFIRMING.pdf> (accessed July 5, 2009).



denying the divinity of Christ, and a deep trust in the Spirit”<sup>55</sup> is essential to the theological life of the church. Theological agreement exists concerning the congregation being called to know God better within a safe spiritual environment.

Important values are evidenced by the people’s desire to live what they believe. The church is generally accepting of anyone, committed to caring for one another, and invested in independent thinking. The church values being a place where people can come and trust that Jesus loves them and, therefore, that the people of the church will also love them. The congregation values honesty, integrity, hospitality, and rich connections between the church and the world. A place of empowerment not isolation, the church focuses on love rather than a statement, creed, or set of doctrines. Higher than a system of belief, the church values the living out of a journey, a way of life, of being or embodying good news that must engage people in loving service. The “costly journey toward God unfolds through personal experience and efforts of justice and peace in the world.”<sup>56</sup>

Members of the congregation observe the following positive ministry practices that tell the ongoing story of Sixth Avenue. A frequently referred to positive practice of ministry is monthly communion. Communion is declared as an invitation to an “inclusive community where everyone is welcome at the table because Jesus Christ is the host and he welcomes everyone. No one is excluded. Communion at Sixth Avenue UCC is participation in the Body of the Risen Christ.... Through the marriage of our faith and God’s grace ... we become what we eat ... in order to carry on Jesus’ ministry of love and liberation for all people. At the communion table, the Holy Spirit rebirths us through

---

<sup>55</sup>Interviews with Pastor Dan Geslin during June 2009.

<sup>56</sup>Ibid.

the sharing of this meal....” The broadly open communion table is an identity marker for Sixth Avenue, also recognized by the association, and the conference.

Other positive ministry practices include efforts to support the food bank at Denver Inner City Parish; Pastor Dan’s contemplative, congregational prayer near the end of the liturgy; support for a multitude of social justice activities; opening the church inexpensively to tenants and classes in the wider community; and Pastor Dan’s Tuesday evening lectionary Bible study discussions. Finally, the most frequently mentioned positive ministry practice is Pastor Dan’s sermons each week, which serve to inspire and deepen the faith of many people at Sixth Avenue.

The heart of Sixth Avenue resides in the faithful, loving people who currently make up the congregation as well as the more than century-old legacy of women, men, and families who worshiped and served Jesus Christ in Capitol Hill of Denver, Colorado. Theirs is the history of a Christian community committed to diversity and the discovery of new Christ-centered ways to accomplish unity. The strong independent streak characterizing the denomination holds true at Sixth Avenue and fills the history pages of local, regional, and national expressions of the church. Their belief that God is still speaking serves to enable the UCC to continue its historic mission of being a united and uniting church, focusing on God as the author of the Church, committed to Jesus Christ as the only head of the Church, and witnessing to the power of the Holy Spirit on behalf of the Church. The diverse nature of the gospel preached by the UCC and specifically embodied at Sixth Avenue is explored next.

## CHAPTER 2

### DESCRIPTION OF THE PAST AND PRESENT EVANGELISTIC EFFORTS OF SIXTH AVENUE

Beginning with a brief description of “the progressive, inclusive, biblical gospel of Jesus Christ”<sup>57</sup> as it is proclaimed and applied at Sixth Avenue, chapter 2 explores the fears, hesitations, successes, failures, areas of growth, and reasons to celebrate in the past and present life of the church. Building upon current outreach efforts at Sixth Avenue, groundwork for a rediscovery of Christian witness is laid. Taken into account are some of the attitudes, traditions, programs, and barriers to Christian witness within the United Church of Christ.

#### **The Gospel of Jesus Christ**

Most lay people at Sixth Avenue articulate their understanding of the gospel primarily in reference to the preaching of Pastor Dan Geslin. In this church, “no one seems to use the gospel or the Bible as a weapon,” which reflects the past experiences of 50 percent of those surveyed, representing 10 percent of the current members. They hear in Pastor Dan’s preaching a different gospel, a gospel that is truly good news. The gospel

---

<sup>57</sup>Chapter 2 is primarily sourced through survey interviews of 20 percent of the current Sixth Avenue UCC members, whose histories range from twelve months to seventy-five years. The interviewees include the current pastor, as well as members of the current and prior leadership teams. Many responses are paraphrased with the exception of the noted quotations, which use the exact words of those surveyed.

of Jesus Christ enlivens the faith of one member because the people at Sixth Avenue take care of each other and their neighbors. “Reconciliation is difficult. It is so hard not to be judgmental about what is important to you.” For many, the short version of the gospel includes loving God and one’s neighbor, a gift of grace. Preaching the gospel in the context of communion, Pastor Dan explains how Jesus accomplished reconciliation.

How does Jesus Christ do that? Through his *way*, through his life and death and resurrection. The notion of the body and the blood in communion is emblematic of his life and death. And so we study his life and death, his *way*, and support each other in community as we practice his way of being in the world ... we are transformed into Christ’s body and blood.<sup>58</sup>

For more than a few members, defining the gospel is difficult. Some refer to the gospel as “The Golden Rule,” described as “doing to others as you would have them do to you.” One thoughtful leadership team member admits uncertainty about what he believes, wishing he could describe his Christian faith better. “I want to believe that there is a divinely guided revelation about Christ’s life and message. I want it to work and I realized recently that reason itself doesn’t meet all my needs, so I returned to religion to find something more.” Another member summarized her understanding of the gospel when she said that “community spirituality is more important than individual spirituality.” In the past, several members avoided “gospel churches” because “those churches seemed enmeshed with conservatives where the rules were emphasized, the rules found in the Book. The quoting of scriptures did more damage than good.”

Among most survey respondents it is believed that the good news, regardless of who you are or what you have done, is that God loves you, embraces you, and wants to redeem and empower human beings and all of creation. Most people made at least

---

<sup>58</sup>Dan Geslin, “Sacramental Living: Gathering Up All Things Together into Wholeness,” Sermon for the third week of Easter (Denver: Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ, 2009), 2.

minimal passing reference to Jesus Christ enduring the supreme sacrifice and mending the brokenness of humanity. Looking at the stories in the Bible concerning the life and mission of Jesus Christ and applying them today represents the congregation's general summary of the gospel. To many at Sixth Avenue, the real and true gospel consists "in the words and thinking of Jesus Christ, which excludes no one because Jesus was inclusive of all people."

Some Sixth Avenue members who have formal theological education (approximately twenty percent of the current congregation) formed their understanding of the gospel over many years of ministry service. Common among clergy at Sixth Avenue is a belief in "the good news as God's love available to everyone!" The gospel is "scandalous," one twenty-year veteran minister exclaimed, adding that "we often read the Bible as self-validating and then miss the hard edges so that we can avoid feeling personally scandalized. We have centuries of experience getting into bed with the empire. The result is a feel-good gospel that keeps us at a safe distance from the cross." Loving and serving each other and the poor are the core teachings of Jesus according to most clergy. Bob and Annabel, retired long-time UCC pastors who hold very high respect for Unitarian thought, are uncomfortable being regarded as Trinitarian. They "do not believe that Jesus is God, but rather have faith that Jesus was a human being [through whom] we have access to God and know God." They struggle with "the logic of a god who had to send his child to die for human beings." Ed and Gretchen, another long-time UCC clergy couple, prefer focusing on the events of Jesus' life and how he interacted with people during the course of his ministry. While Ed is committed to a theology centered on the

cross, Gretchen thinks there may be “too much emphasis on the cross and it does not necessarily help people live out the gospel.”

### Progressive

Three key words used consistently to describe the good news of Jesus Christ at Sixth Avenue are progressive, inclusive, and biblical. Progressive is a very important descriptor of the good news in spite of the fact that the meanings of the word are diverse among the members. Some identify progressive with liberal religious and political beliefs. “Forward thinking, openness to new ideas, and connection to tradition while not bound by tradition”: each of these phrases opens doors for dialogue and indicates resistance to dogma. Questioning truth is welcome and expected as an expression of the nature of progressive Christianity at Sixth Avenue.

While most Sixth Avenue members would not be able to describe the nature and tenets of the Progressive Christian movement in a systematic manner, these views influence the church. *The Center for Progressive Christianity* identifies eight key points to define their identity as progressive Christians. Briefly, those eight points<sup>59</sup> are: an approach to God through the life and teachings of Jesus; an acknowledgment that the faithfulness of other people who have other names for the way to God’s realm is as true for them, as ours are for us; a belief that the sharing of bread and wine in Jesus’ name is a representation of an ancient vision of God’s feast for all people; an invitation for all people to participate in their community and worship without insisting on uniformity of belief; a belief that the way they behave toward one another is the fullest expression of

---

<sup>59</sup>The Center for Progressive Christianity’s web site, <http://www.tpc.org/about/8points.cfm> (accessed April 27, 2010).

what they believe; the discovery that more grace is found in questioning than in absolutes; a dedication to equipping one another for the pursuit of peace and justice among all people; a recognition that being followers of Jesus is costly and includes selfless love and resistance to evil.

For the national movement of the UCC, being progressive is linked to church planting and church renewal as the denomination seeks to “adapt to opportunities for church growth in a rapidly changing culture.”<sup>60</sup> The UCC’s attempt to develop new models for sustainable church growth and church revival is motivated by the broad desire to reduce membership decline and offer a faith “that believes God’s family includes all people...a faith for which millions of Americans hunger.”<sup>61</sup>

Many at Sixth Avenue connect being progressive to following the way of Jesus in the midst of twenty-first century challenges. One theologically educated member declares, “The Bible in one hand and the newspaper in the other hand, that’s what we mean by progressive!” Sixth Avenue’s focus on progressive Christianity enables the church to concentrate on human equality and justice for people of color, women, gays, immigrants, and those living in poverty, but leaves the church unaware of a more expansive understanding of the meaning of progressive Christianity. Phyllis Tickle describes progressive Christianity as maintaining a position “in institutional Christianity,” while also wanting

to wrestle with what they see as the fool heartedness of holding on to dogma-based ideas and doctrinally restricted governance and praxis... like householders who have inherited a house; but instead of being refurbishers, they are

---

<sup>60</sup>Andrew Lang, United Church of Christ, “Local Church Ministries Board Votes to Create Church Development Center,” October 27, 2009, <http://www.progressiverenewal.org/> (accessed April 27, 2010).

<sup>61</sup>Ibid.

remodelers. For them, it makes sense not to restore what one has by retouching its former beauty, but rather to simply open the whole place a bit more...remove inconvenient walls, replace some drafty windows, and even knock off an obstructive porch or two.<sup>62</sup>

Tickle understands progressives as not wanting to dismantle or damage radically the traditions, structures, and systems of the past, while being expansively open to new, fresh ways of thinking.

### Inclusive

Being inclusive requires the church “to provide an open, safe space for anyone to explore Christianity and to become part of the community.” It also implies being open and affirming, non-creedal, relationally diverse, and pluralistic. “We do not have to agree.” One member referred to Galatians 3:28 as the basis for inclusivity. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” Some members view Sixth Avenue’s emphasis on inclusivity as primarily about accepting different sexual orientations, while others wish the emphasis could be more broadly extended. “Everyone is welcome,” is a common phrase among the people of Sixth Avenue and diversity is frequently used to mean inclusivity.

The “extravagant welcome”<sup>63</sup> of the UCC extends to all races, genders, orientations, educational levels, persons with disabilities, income brackets, ages, cultures, and theological perspectives. For the people of Sixth Avenue, inclusivity is a sign of the

---

<sup>62</sup>Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2008), 140-141.

<sup>63</sup>The extravagant welcome characterizes the UCC’s description of the denomination in its web article “About Stillspeaking,” <http://www.ucc.org/god-is-still-speaking/about/>, especially demonstrated in the Stillspeaking Ministry of the “God is Still Speaking” campaign, initiated in 2004.



Realm or the Kingdom of God. Perhaps the most discussed aspect of the good news, being inclusive has rich implications of consistent hospitality grounded in the gospel. “The outsider brought in,” is one person’s definition of inclusive. Respect, equality, human value and worth, are referenced as “we look for new ways of understanding what it means for humanity to know God personally and to be in community together. And we do not interpret the Bible literally.”<sup>64</sup> Pastor Dan articulates beautifully the focus of inclusivity for Sixth Avenue. “Inclusivity is not the end; it is the means. We are not the United Church of Inclusivity. We have a larger vision .... We want to be equal members of the Body of Christ, a community of faith that has a universal higher purpose.”<sup>65</sup>

### Biblical

Being biblical is less important for the people of Sixth Avenue than being progressive and inclusive, with the exception of the pastor and a few members, one of whom “misses opening the Bible to a specific passage in worship. Even though I have been damaged by past experiences where the Bible was used as an excuse not to love someone or as a weapon against me, I still treasure the Bible.” Most members connect the broad welcome of the church to a biblical issue. Inclusivity “is the way of Jesus. It is biblical. It is the good news.” Since the Bible contains the teaching of Jesus and the stories of his life-giving presence among humanity, the Bible is important, though Sixth Avenue “wishes to avoid the conservative, religious-right trappings of a literal Bible.”

---

<sup>64</sup>Survey conclusions are drawn from interviews with church members during May and June, 2009.

<sup>65</sup>Dan Geslin, “In Search of a Christian” (Sermon for Easter 4, Denver: Sixth Avenue United Church of Christ, 2000), 4.

Simply stated, biblical means grounded in the Bible. To Sixth Avenue, being biblical holds implications about truth: “the truth represented by the words, not the truth of the actual words themselves.” Sixth Avenue views the Scriptures as “a testimony not a test of faith” and as the history of the development of their Christian beliefs. Walter Brueggemann is the theologian referred to most often among the congregation and is known as the UCC biblical scholar of choice, even while he teaches at a Presbyterian seminary. For most, the Bible is primarily important as the source for the stories of Jesus Christ. Many admit not believing everything in the Bible and not seeing it as a rule for life, except perhaps the teachings of Jesus. “The Bible is *the* story and we view it as *our* story. We work to understand how it informed Jesus and how it can inform us.”

### **Fears and Hesitancies Related to Evangelism**

Historic animosities concerning how to interpret the Bible, how to live out the message of the Bible, what it means to include all people in the Kingdom of God, and how the Church spreads the good news to those who do not yet know the way of Jesus, are issues not easily resolved at Sixth Avenue. In the midst of weighty resistance to literal interpretations of the Bible, being wrongly identified with conservative Christianity is an ever-present fear. Because evangelism is strongly connected to conservative, evangelical Christianity, evangelism resounds like a clanging, crashing, obnoxious cymbal at Sixth Avenue. For most members, just the mention of the word elicits negative, painful, even damaging memories and feelings.

Fears and hesitancies are high at Sixth Avenue, and several common threads are woven through the fabric of the church’s experience. Prominent among many is the impression that evangelism is connected to a brand of Christianity from which these

members have turned away. The most often recalled names associated with evangelism, referred to negatively as televangelists, include Tammy Faye and Jim Bakker, Oral Roberts, and Jerry Falwell. Most Sixth Avenue members referencing this list of people see them as “cheaters, fanatics, swindlers, and exploitive Bible thumpers. Those folks made being a Christian really hard. They were in fact, the enemy.”

Grouped with these same people are Mormons and Jehovah’s Witnesses who show up “at your doorstep on Saturday morning trying to convert you to their way of thinking.” Church members also referred negatively to “anyone who might use the Four Spiritual Laws to convert innocent people.” The general reaction to an aggressive, propositional, confrontational, “we’re right and you’re wrong” style of witnessing is repulsion. “I wanna run! It’s oppressive, dogmatic, unyielding, and not open to discussion.” One clergy summarized the fears and hesitations of many: “Any time a person threatens another person with hell, this is harmful.”

Realistically, “we don’t really do evangelism here,”<sup>66</sup> in part due to a belief that if a person shapes their life in order to get into heaven, then faith is inauthentic. Many examples of friends and family members who “got born again” and then several years later “grew out of it” dominate the church’s corporate story. A deep fear about the word conversion also hovers around the edges of the survey narrative. Attempts to save people seem narrow and judgmental to most Sixth Avenue members. The general consensus is that phrases like sharing our faith, sharing the good news, or witnessing as more than words, are preferable to words like evangelizing, witnessing, and converting.

---

<sup>66</sup>Survey conclusions drawn from interviews with current lay leadership team members during May and June, 2009.

Consistent uneasiness about evangelism is balanced by a positive view of the good news. Bob, a respected retired clergy person announces enthusiastically, “To spread the good news without being oppressive is my mission!” Some members think the UCC would benefit from reclaiming the word evangelism as the offering of good news to a world in need. “The baggage attached to the word is like the baggage attached to patriotism.” Several see themselves as patriotic but would not want to be associated with late twentieth-century American patriotism. In the same way, evangelism has “gotten a bad rap.” In order to move toward the rediscovery of evangelism, attention is now given to assessing honestly the successes and failures of Christian witness at Sixth Avenue.

### **Successes and Failures Related to Evangelism**

Witnessing to the good news takes shape at Sixth Avenue within a company of successful conversationalists and potential storytellers, eager to engage in dialogue and discussion. Most people describe themselves as conversational, inquiring, and/or invitational when asked to choose between the descriptive words “private, inquiring, conversational, invitational, or confrontational.” Two survey questions were posed in relation first to sharing their faith with friends, family members, and co-workers and second in relation to strangers or people they have met recently. In response to both questions, 0 percent responded with the word confrontational and only 3 percent of the church chose the word private. Storytelling and listening surfaced often during the interviews as a better way of witnessing, in spite of the fact that none of the survey questions made use of any word associated with the telling of stories. “Hearing their stories is evangelism. People want to tell their story. And then everything rests in the trust

that God will do what God wants to do.”<sup>67</sup> Some deduce that interactions with Jesus caused people in the Bible to want to be with him. Sixth Avenue exudes attraction to Jesus, and the feeling that “Jesus was magnetic.”<sup>68</sup>

Lesslie Newbigin might have shared their fears and hesitations because he believed that when “ownership of absolute truth gains power it is oppressive and therefore against the way of Jesus.”<sup>69</sup> In that spirit he wrote, “The essential contribution of the Christian to dialogue [with people of other faiths and people of no faith] will simply be the telling of the story, the story of Jesus, the story of the Bible.”<sup>70</sup> Telling the story well and embodying it authentically means that the storyteller must engage in “a love affair, not an affair of truth.”<sup>71</sup> A fresh approach to Christian witness may be a very significant positive step toward faith sharing characterized by love, humility, and respect.

To combat the legitimate fears of the people at Sixth Avenue, new frameworks for evangelism must be explored. One of the ways the UCC collects best practices in evangelism and invites congregational support for Christian witness is through *Evangelism Connections*, “an ecumenical partnership whose aim is to help people and churches engage in effective evangelism.”<sup>72</sup> *Evangelism Connections* favorably quotes one collaborative partner, the American Baptist Churches USA:

---

<sup>67</sup>Survey conclusion is drawn from interviews with church members during May and June, 2009.

<sup>68</sup>Survey interviews with church members during May and June, 2009.

<sup>69</sup>Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, 163.

<sup>70</sup>*Ibid.*, 182-183.

<sup>71</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup>Evangelism Connections, “About Evangelism,” <http://www.evangelismconnections.org/about-ec> (accessed July 6, 2009).

Evangelism is the joyous witness of the people of God to God's redeeming love, which urges repentance and reconciliation to God and each other through faith in Jesus Christ--who lived, died, and was raised from the dead. Through renewal with Jesus, believers are empowered by the Holy Spirit and incorporated into the church for worship, fellowship, nurture, and engagement as disciples in God's mission of evangelization and liberation within society and creation, signifying the Kingdom that is present and yet to come.<sup>73</sup>

Directly from the UCC, Minister and Team Leader of Congregational Vitality and

Discipleship Ministry and Local Church Ministries David C. Schoen edits an article by

Richard Peace, which offers the following conclusions about evangelism.

And this is what evangelism is all about: creating space in which (the still speaking) God can be found. Our role as evangelists is to so know God that we can invite others to that knowledge; to be so experienced in how to know God that we can lead others to such experiences. At this point it ceases to be a matter of finding the right "technique" by which to do evangelism. It becomes a matter of knowing how to reach out to (the still speaking) God and inviting others to do so with you.<sup>74</sup>

In addition, a local UCC pastor responded to anti-evangelism bias in the church in 1990 by initiating a campaign using buttons that read, "Evangelism is not a dirty word!"<sup>75</sup> David Schoen's team suggests direct connections between church vitality and evangelism efforts. "The task of evangelism today is the formation of disciples and missional communities of faith for the transformation of the world and its people."<sup>76</sup> Even in the midst of acknowledging that "evangelism is not yet a core value for the

---

<sup>73</sup>The official definition of evangelism, adopted by American Baptist Churches USA in 1984 as quoted from Jonathan Shively, "An Open Letter," <http://www.evangelismconnections.org/> (accessed July 6, 2009).

<sup>74</sup>Richard V. Peace, "Evangelism and Spiritual Formation," *Fuller Theological Seminary News and Notes*, Fall 2004, 3.

<sup>75</sup>Ron Buford, "Who's Growing in the UCC, Who's Not, and Why?" March 2001, <http://ucc.org/ucnews/mar2001/whos-growing-in-the-ucc.html> (accessed July 6, 2009).

<sup>76</sup>Evangelism Ministry Team, "Navigational Vision and Strategies for Twenty-first Century in the United Church of Christ," *The E Word* 2.2, no. 2.1, <http://www.ucc.org/evangelism/e-word> (accessed July 6, 2009).

whole church,”<sup>77</sup> the team is optimistic about the future. “The good news of the gospel revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ opens up a future of promise and hope [founded on] God’s faithfulness.”<sup>78</sup> Sixth Avenue is growing seeds of hope.

Notwithstanding hope, specific successes and failures are difficult to explore in terms of evangelistic work in the past and present life of the church. Most people interviewed could name neither a success nor a failure in the realm of Christian witness. Pastor Dan describes successful evangelism in the context of worship, the center piece of which is missional preaching wherein the congregation is invited to follow the way of Jesus in expressions that are culturally appropriate to Sixth Avenue. Pastor Dan regards the general spiritual life of the church as an example of evangelistic energy.

One potential marker of evangelistic success can be found in the Rocky Mountain Conference’s report of a “22.22% increase in the average weekly worship attendance at Sixth Avenue in 2008 over 2007.”<sup>79</sup> A similar increase occurred in 2007. During a time in which mainline denominations continue a steady decline in weekly worship attendance and “the UCC statistically led all other reporting denominations in 2008 with a six percent drop in membership,”<sup>80</sup> Sixth Avenue defies the statistics. This growth may be indicative of evangelistic potential. “We all need evangelical courage to invite new

---

<sup>77</sup>Evangelism Ministry Team, “Navigational Vision and Strategies.”

<sup>78</sup>Ibid.

<sup>79</sup>“News of the Rocky Mountain Conference,” *United Church News*, a publication of the United Church of Christ, 25, no. 3 (June/July 2009): Section B 6000069, B2.

<sup>80</sup>Gregg Brekke, “Living and Breathing in a New Era of Evangelical Courage,” *United Church News*, a publication of the United Church of Christ 25, no. 3 (June/July 2009), A4.

people into faith-filled relationships so that we can be good news in our communities and around the world.”<sup>81</sup>

Some in the denomination assess evangelism efforts of the past as failing. The UCC has “not been known for its evangelistic fervor at least not in living memory,” says ordained UCC minister, Dr. Richard Peace, who “has come to believe that the UCC is ... now hard at work seeking to recover the ministry of evangelism .... The first challenge in our congregations is to deal with the cringe factor when we mention evangelism.”<sup>82</sup> Peace addresses the difference between belonging and believing when he explains evangelism is “all about an invitation to believe the gospel. In the UCC we are pretty good when it comes to discussing God but we need to learn what it means to talk about Jesus.”<sup>83</sup>

### **Opportunities for Growth**

Building upon the evangelistic opportunities afforded at Sixth Avenue, the church displays several positive starting points for Christian witness. In these, the congregation reveals a God-centered perception of the world, along with an attentiveness to the needs in local and global communities. One example is the church’s financial and relational involvement with a medical and pastoral missionary couple in Haiti.<sup>84</sup> Another starting point for witness is the church’s willingness to make stronger gospel connections through

---

<sup>81</sup>Brekke, “Living and Breathing.”

<sup>82</sup>Richard Peace, “Rediscovering Evangelism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” *United Church News*, a publication of the United Church of Christ 25, no. 3 (June/July 2009), A10.

<sup>83</sup>*Ibid.*, A11.

<sup>84</sup>Kim Bentrott and Patrick Bentrott, “Follow-Up,” *Adventures in Life Blog*, comment posted July 1, 2009, <http://www.kimandpatrick.blogspot.com/> (accessed July 6, 2009).



new involvement with two important issues: global partnerships to end hunger and participation in eco-justice.

First, global partnerships to end hunger through Bread for the World expedite gospel integration between the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and global social justice. Bread for the World is a collective Christian voice urging our nation's decision makers to end hunger at home and abroad. The organization effectively, unapologetically connects justice for hungry people in the United States and around the world with God's grace in Jesus Christ. Bread for the World offers help to neighbors near and far and is founded on Christian Scriptures, worship, and prayer, while boldly proclaiming that Christians are "called to use the abundance of God's creation to help those in need...."<sup>85</sup>

A second beginning point of evangelistic praxis at Sixth Avenue is participation in eco-justice. "Eco-justice is about ecological sustainability and human justice. It sees environmental issues and justice issues as intertwined elements of how humans are called to relate to God's creation."<sup>86</sup> Ecological stewardship of the earth and human justice provide practical and theological connections to the death and resurrection of Jesus and the proclamation of the good news of God's Kingdom for Sixth Avenue.

Colossians 1:15-20 reveals God's loving intention that reaches out to all God created and asserts that all of life is bound up together; no part of God's creation can separate itself from the whole. Jesus Christ holds all things together and calls followers of Christ to develop ministries that are faithful and effective in working toward social

---

<sup>85</sup>Bread for the World, website, <http://www.bread.org/offeringofletters> (accessed July 6, 2009).

<sup>86</sup>Eco-Justice Ministries, website, <http://www.eco-justice.org/perspectives.asp> (accessed July 7, 2009).

justice and environmental sustainability. The holding-together bond, συνέστηκεν, has been forged by the cohesive glue of Christ in the seen and unseen world, and, in God's future, when we will exist as resurrected bodies on a new earth, where humanity and the rest of creation will continue to be held together by Christ. This future requires a holistic gospel now. Thomas Aquinas affirms that "if we don't understand creation correctly, we can't hope to understand God correctly."<sup>87</sup> Inviting Sixth Avenue to a more holistic expression of the gospel includes a grounding in the most crucial creation-care relationship, that of Jesus to all of creation. Connecting humanity's relationships to creation, with Christ's relationship with creation, we can learn to tell the whole gospel story to those who do not yet know Jesus Christ as the ultimate hope for a creation groaning under sin, including human beings (Rom. 8:19–21; Col. 1:20, 27).

After considering evangelistic successes, failures, and opportunities, the missional challenge at Sixth Avenue is at least three-fold. First, connecting the congregation more acutely to the name of Jesus Christ seems the highest priority. Second, fostering integration between the service activities of the church and the stories of Jesus Christ, along with the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is a crucial task ahead. Third, reclaiming the message of εὐαγγέλιον, as good news for Sixth Avenue is a main focus of what follows. The context requires that those who wish to engage in fruitful Christian witness listen attentively without hidden conversion agendas. The context also requires that those learning to share the good news must do so by telling their stories of faith along with the stories of Jesus in unselfconscious ways. In order to address relevantly and

---

<sup>87</sup>Paula Gonzales, "Spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Radical Grace Renewing the Face of the Earth*, a publication of The Center for Action and Contemplation, 22, no. 1 (January-March, 2009), 31.

authentically the presenting missional challenge, final contextual attention is now given to reasons for celebration and specific barriers to Christian witness at Sixth Avenue.

### **Reasons for Celebration**

Much exists in the congregation that warrants celebration. “It’s all about people coming to new life in Christ!”<sup>88</sup> One ordained clergy believes “anything that leads people to knowledge of the creative, transformative possibilities of God in Christ” is worth celebrating. For others, celebration revolves around personal growth that enables followers of Christ “to integrate a more expansive understanding of the good news of redemption.” Others celebrate growth in terms of numbers of people in the building. From this perspective, growth is happening in every corner of the church, validated by more church members, more visitors who return more frequently, more people enjoying post-service coffee hours, more young families with more children, more people in the choir, and more people serving. The “more” is often a reference to “more than last year” or “before Pastor Dan came four years ago.” Many who celebrate numerical growth feel relieved that the church is surviving. Due to the 1990s’ near death experience of the church, at least six members cite the survival of the congregation against all odds as the main reason for celebration.

Overall, Sixth Avenue celebrates a renewal of energy in worship and in service. Evidence of corporate vitality is celebrated specifically through the development of a new website, beautiful music in worship each week, a balanced budget “for the first time in more than a decade under Pastor Dan’s leadership,” and an explosion of diversity in relation to the wide variety of members and visitors affiliating with the church. “I feel

---

<sup>88</sup>Survey conclusions are drawn from interviews with church members during May and June 2009.

proud to be here” was the most used descriptive phrase by survey respondents when asked for current reasons to celebrate. Several leaders believe Sixth Avenue has a mission from God in the Denver area. The energy to discover and enact a God-given mission is a big reason to celebrate. Pastor Dan’s preaching creates thirst for mission and is noted by most of the congregation as significant grounds for celebration. A growing sense of community and of relating to one another spiritually also infuses the church’s mission. The pastor’s weekly, congregational, contemplative prayer time is celebrated in relation to community and mission. Almost 10 percent of the congregation thoughtfully celebrates the experience of a special, divine presence in the sanctuary and in worship services.

John Inge’s *A Christian Theology of Place* suggests the “sacrilizing of storied places is both possible and important in the Christian scheme of things. . . . [P]articular places associated with salvation history can be perceived as potent mediators of divine presence.”<sup>89</sup> He writes about “storied places” as locations of memory, meaning, and a “three-way relationship between God, his people, and place.”<sup>90</sup> He draws relational conclusions by engaging with the Old Testament narrative, the New Testament witness, and the “particularity of God’s relationship with humanity,”<sup>91</sup> which flows from the incarnation. Inge’s work might serve to woo Sixth Avenue toward a stronger sense of the theological importance of place in the dialogue about mission and evangelism. There is interest from the pastor and within the congregation for connecting an understanding of

---

<sup>89</sup>John Inge, *A Christian Theology of Place: Explorations in Practical, Pastoral, and Empirical Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003), 53-54.

<sup>90</sup>*Ibid.*, 53-54.

<sup>91</sup>*Ibid.*, 58.

sacred space into the church's conversation about inhabiting and embodying God's story.

Prayerfully discerning the tangible presence of God in the church building prepares Sixth Avenue for fresh expressions of mission. The church's location evokes a sense of the divine, but The Presence seems quieted. God's presence over the last one hundred years can be felt at Sixth Avenue, but has not been discovered fully.

Acknowledging the importance of place is an interpretive task of leadership, both lay and pastoral. As a leader in the church and an ordination candidate, I sense the presence of God as gentle memories needing to be reenacted, retold, and recalled in acts of worship and witness. I attest to N. T. Wright's words, "When God is known, sought, and wrestled within a place, a memory of that remains, which those who know and love God can pick up."<sup>92</sup> I hesitate to overemphasize an intuitive interpretation of place, yet I have picked up the feeling that God is nearby and the presence of God can be brought more clearly to the attention of the people in the pews. In light of the number of church members who acknowledge the sacredness of the space at Sixth Avenue as a reason to celebrate, I envision that the place itself bears witness to the fullness of the gospel on behalf of the world and might indeed sustain fuller witness to Jesus Christ.

### **Barriers to Christian Witness**

To conclude the contextual analysis of Sixth Avenue UCC, three barriers to the witness of the good news are acknowledged. Each of the barriers presents serious challenges to be overcome in the course of this project. The first barrier must be owned by the writer. My comfortable, trained use of traditionally accepted evangelical language

---

<sup>92</sup>Wright, "A Church Shaped by Mission."

is a barrier to the proclamation of the gospel in this setting. For example, inclusive language in the UCC has evolved theologically over years of biblical scholarship, loving empathy, and strong activism on behalf of women and other marginalized people. The UCC observes a practiced, disciplined use of appropriate language, in reference to human beings and to God. My undisciplined, sometimes inappropriate inferences to mankind, men, male, etc., stand out at times like a very sore thumb. I welcome correction, especially as it relates to human beings, and I have invited several Sixth Avenue members to point out the errors of my ways. They are happy to accommodate. If left unattended, inappropriate, non-inclusive language could obstruct my usefulness to God in the very important ministry of evangelism at Sixth Avenue.

The second barrier is theological. As a denomination, the UCC maintains a moderate Christology. This national perspective does not necessarily translate into the local or association setting, and, in fact, cannot be enforced in any way. Requiring beliefs or practices violates the very essence of the UCC's historical, congregational polity. The paradigm shift to be offered in this paper revolves around a high view of Jesus Christ and is perhaps the most significant theological and practical non-negotiable inherent in the strategy. This possible barrier, if left unattended, could result in the congregation at Sixth Avenue feeling infringed upon by a theological stand perceived in the church as a dogmatic, exclusive position. On the other hand, for the UCC to embody the way of Jesus as genuinely inclusive, space exists also for a high Christology.

The final barrier is the frequent, harsh criticism articulated against conservative evangelicalism, which could damage the church's ability to be open to the possibility of non-oppressive, non-judgmental, non-fear-based Christian witness. This barrier is present

in other mainline denominations, and in some emerging church expressions. The middle ground way supported by evangelicals like Jim Wallis and Shane Claiborne, potential bridge builders at Sixth Avenue, offers important resources for what follows. The abundance of common ground, my growing love for the United Church of Christ and the people of Sixth Avenue, an increasingly clear calling from God, and the awareness that I have a lot to learn from Sixth Avenue draw me forward down the possibly hurdle-laden road ahead.

The theological work that follows rests between a fierce liberalism and a severe evangelicalism. I find hope in the middle ground cultivated by involvement, service, and leadership at Sixth Avenue and by a handful of conversation partners. The work of these theologians and authors narrows the holistic missional thinking and practical ministry direction of this essay. The goal is an integrated, culturally appropriate expression of the work of evangelism for Sixth Avenue. The most influential of my partners are discussed next. Among them are the works of Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross, Walter Brueggemann, Eugene Peterson, George G. Hunter III, C. Norman Kraus, Richard V. Peace, Martha Grace Reese, Elaine A. Robinson, and Klyne R. Snodgrass.

PART TWO

BIBLICAL AND THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS,  
REFLECTIONS, AND DISCOVERIES

CHAPTER 3

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE FOR STRENGTHENING  
EVANGELISM PRACTICES AT SIXTH AVENUE

Chapter 3's literature review is intended to unearth new ways of thinking about Christian witness for the Sixth Avenue context in order to engage lay people in the task of evangelism. The selected literature acknowledges common ground within Sixth Avenue's diverse understandings of the gospel and challenges Sixth Avenue's generally negative view of evangelism. The literature review also strives to make helpful connections between liberal and conservative translations of what it means to follow Jesus Christ in the twenty-first century. Practical, direction-setting conclusions are drawn for the empowering of Sixth Avenue UCC's witness in the world.



*Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

**Edited by Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross**

At the outset, *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* informs the evangelism discussion.

Editors Andrew Walls and Cathy Ross report five marks of mission that have missiological and ecclesiological relevance for the UCC in the twenty-first century. Their findings provide the makings of a solid framework, “a good working basis for a holistic approach to mission.”<sup>93</sup> While not the final word concerning all the complexities of mission, the five marks represent fertile middle ground where the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ are integrated with social justice for all peoples and proper stewardship of the planet in order to clarify and live out the gospel of Jesus Christ. The five marks are: “To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom; to teach, baptize, and nurture new believers; to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.”<sup>94</sup>

Walls and Ross guide the conversation for bridge building between liberal and evangelical Christian practices of evangelism and mission with a description of mission as “about the restoration of broken relationship between God, human beings, and the natural world.”<sup>95</sup> Congruent with their findings, the cultivation of experiences and skills for envisioning, telling, and integrating the stories of Jesus is crucial. Helping Sixth

---

<sup>93</sup>Andrew Walls and Kathy Ross, eds., *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), xi-xiv.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Dave Bookless, “To Strive to Safeguard the Integrity of Creation and Sustain and Renew the Life of the Earth,” in *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Walls and Ross, 100.

Avenue members to embody and integrate the stories of Jesus into their growing love for marginalized people is a suitable starting point for evangelism. Making central each of the five marks of mission in the life of Sixth Avenue, while increasing the church's engagement with social concerns, initiates a holistic embrace of Christian witness. Wise assimilation of Kingdom proclamation with care for the poor, the planet, and people in need of justice provides new ways of thinking about and practicing evangelism.

Each of the five marks requires fresh contextual work in the Sixth Avenue setting, particularly the proclamation of the good news of the Kingdom, and the teaching, baptizing, and nurturing of new believers. Admittedly, the last three marks (responding to human need by loving service; seeking to transform unjust structures of society; striving to safeguard the integrity of creation while sustaining and renewing the life of the earth) form a more easily transferable framework for a holistic approach to mission in the UCC. Natural connections between the five marks of mission and Sixth Avenue follow.

That “God is still speaking,”<sup>96</sup> in, to, and through the world God created expands the discussion about mission and evangelism. *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* refers frequently to God's mission in God's world (for example on pages 37, 38, 45, 67, 68, 104, 176, 179, 180, 183-185, 188, 191), including Haami Chapman's insight that “long before we arrived, God was there.”<sup>97</sup> Solid grounding in *missio Dei* frees the church from the arrogance they perceive in conservative, evangelical forms of evangelism. Discerning and discovering what God, through the Holy Spirit, is doing currently in our midst is

---

<sup>96</sup>The UCC campaign entitled “God is still speaking” is used in the denomination to embolden alertness to the ongoing revelation and reality that God is indeed at work in our specific settings now.

<sup>97</sup>Haami Chapman, “To Respond to Human Need by Loving Service,” in *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Walls and Ross, 54.

awakening a more active commitment to “listen and observe the signs of God in our lives and communities.”<sup>98</sup> Signs of the present and coming reign of God compel Christ followers to cooperate more fully with God in God’s work.

Another correlation between Sixth Avenue and the five marks of mission is the understanding that “everything – and mission in particular – is about relationships.”<sup>99</sup> A posture of welcoming and inviting fellow human beings on the journey toward Christ can grow organically out of relationships with God, neighbor, enemy, and the Earth. For the UCC, facilitating engagement with the poor and the marginalized, in combination with relevant training to tell better the stories of Jesus, may result in the discovery of a new model for sharing the gospel. A fresh version of evangelism that emphasizes “serving the needy and forming relationships with citizens of whatever religious and political persuasion”<sup>100</sup> may correct negative tactics stereotypical of many evangelistic strategies.

Additionally, Sixth Avenue, as part of the UCC in the United States, may benefit from the practical wisdom of Maita Church (the Kyodan United Church of Christ in Yokohama Japan, a UCC affiliate), which reports, “It is understandable that so many churches where the sole stress is on the rational factor lose the younger generation.”<sup>101</sup> The tradition of the UCC emphasizes rational, logical understandings of God and may exclude young people’s needs for experience, feelings, and relationships. Enlarging the

---

<sup>98</sup>Ande Titre, “To Teach, Baptise, and Nurture New Believers,” in *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Walls and Ross, 43.

<sup>99</sup>Bookless, “To Strive to Safeguard,” in *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Walls and Ross, 100.

<sup>100</sup>Tom Krattenmaker, “The Forum: Evangelism 2.0,” *USA Today*, Monday, July 20, 2009, 11A.

<sup>101</sup>Ken Christoph Miyamoto, “Worship Is Nothing but Mission: A Reflection on Some Japanese Experiences,” in *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, ed. Walls and Ross, 163.

place for symbolism, mystery, and passionate, energetic curiosity about Jesus could encourage a new sense of purpose related to Christian witness. These five marks of mission merge together with the work of Walter Brueggemann, instilling suitable biblical vision for an integrated, holistic theology of evangelism at Sixth Avenue.

***Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe***

**by Walter Brueggemann**

The second important work, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe*, by Walter Brueggemann, addresses vision-driven questions about new approaches to evangelism. The stakes are high at Sixth Avenue. “More than the growth of the Church and more than the perpetuation of Christian institutions, the issue is rather that the life of creation, the fabric of human community is deeply at jeopardy among us. The crisis concerning evangelism is a ‘world question’ and not a ‘church question.’”<sup>102</sup> In order to take seriously the concerns of the UCC and Walter Brueggemann, attention must be paid to re-discovering the meaning of the word evangelism. On behalf of Sixth Avenue, the case being made is for the reclamation of the word εὐαγγέλιον.

Εὐαγγέλιον as a noun is used seventy-six times in the New Testament to describe God’s message to humanity as good: good news, good tidings. It is “spoken only of the glad tidings of Christ and his salvation, the Gospel.”<sup>103</sup> The activities that make up the

---

<sup>102</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 46.

<sup>103</sup>Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (electronic ed.) (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000), s.v. “εὐαγγέλιον.”

telling, proclaiming, sharing, preaching, and living of the good news are evangelism. Evangelism means different things to different people in different times and in different traditions. This paper leans heavily on Jesus' style and approach to evangelism. "Jesus models a startling kind of evangelism that loves people deeply, crosses religious, ethnic, and sociopolitical barriers, builds relationships of mutuality, and calls us all into profound, far-reaching transformation."<sup>104</sup>

The image of storytelling is important in the use of the word evangelism. Brueggemann's treatment of narrative as the defining factor for evangelism implies that "evangelism means inviting people into the these stories (i.e., the stories of God's promise, God's deliverance or liberation, and God's gifts) as the definitional story of our life, and thereby authorizing people to give up, abandon, and renounce other stories that have shaped their lives in false or distorting ways."<sup>105</sup> Evangelism in its many forms (e.g., encounter evangelism, mass evangelism, personal evangelism, process evangelism, etc.) can involve speaking, sharing, proclaiming, teaching, preaching, and/or incarnating the gospel. What is spoken and embodied, the message of the gospel, is the good news of the arrival, life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension, future coming, and ongoing presence of Jesus Christ. The telling of God's story includes being welcomed into that story. The way of life upon which much of this paper is based is in line with Brueggemann's passionate declaration that evangelism is "a revolutionary way of enacting the hope and energy of the believing community."<sup>106</sup>

---

<sup>104</sup>Brenda Salter McNeil, *A Credible Witness: Reflections on Power, Evangelism and Race*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008), 18.

<sup>105</sup>Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 10.

<sup>106</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

## *Tell It Slant*

**by Eugene Peterson**

The third conversation partner is Eugene Peterson. Attempting to live and serve in the middle between evangelicalism and liberalism necessitates that at least one of my company be a scholar who is heeded and trusted within both worlds. Peterson is valued by diverse members all along the spectrum of Christian theology. On one end of the continuum his paraphrase of the Bible, *The Message*, is read regularly in many local UCC congregations, including Sixth Avenue. In general terms, Peterson writes,

Story is the most natural way of enlarging our sense of reality, and then enlisting us as participants in it. Stories open doors to areas or aspects of life that we didn't know were there, or had quit noticing out of over-familiarity, or supposed were out-of-bounds for us. They then welcome us in. Stories are verbal acts of hospitality.<sup>107</sup>

On the other end of the spectrum, Peterson's theological work is also cherished among conservative, evangelical organizations like Youth for Christ (YFC). YFC's new approach to evangelism, 3Story Evangelism®, leans heavily on the overlapping of three stories, "God's Story, My Story, and Their Story,"<sup>108</sup> and focuses on how the three stories interact together. Most important to the YFC paradigm is the expansive nature of God's story that provides the over-arching narrative within which all other stories unfold.

At its heart, 3Story® has no rules and no formulas, just relationships. It is a way of living life, a framework for understanding the process of change we experience in our relationships with God and with other people. Out of a relationship with Christ and a relationship with another person, an amazing, heroic Christian life

---

<sup>107</sup>Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, A Conversation in Spiritual Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 13.

<sup>108</sup>Jennifer L. Morgan, serving as YFC's Steward of 3Story 2004-2007, quoted from various YFC training handouts and brochures, 2006.

happens naturally for ordinary, everyday followers of Christ. One life touching another life; life-on-life ministry is what 3Story is all about.<sup>109</sup>

Since part of the hoped for contribution to Sixth Avenue is the equipping of storytellers, Peterson's work in *Tell It Slant* is particularly useful.

Storytellers activate our imagination to see and hear beneath the surface of life and involve us in the many dimensions of what is going on behind our backs or around the corner.... Every time Jesus tells a story, the world of those who listen enlarges, understanding deepens, imaginations are energized. Storytellers invite participation.<sup>110</sup>

Writing about the connection between the Kingdom of God and stories, he suggests that we are already “immersed in a large story of creation and covenant, of Israel and Jesus, the story of Jesus and the stories that Jesus told. We let ourselves be formed by these formative stories.”<sup>111</sup> A story approach to Christian witness consistent with Peterson, the UCC, and YFC would focus on the thoughtful application of the ministry style of Jesus Christ, attending carefully to how he interacted with people. Maximizing the effectiveness of a story style of evangelism in diverse theological settings is dependent on living and preaching the gospel as *the* transforming agent in our society and at Sixth Avenue.

### ***The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West ... Again***

**by George G. Hunter III**

The search for common ground is bolstered dramatically by the next conversation partner, George G. Hunter III, who draws attention to the ministry of St. Patrick in *The*

---

<sup>109</sup>Morgan, serving as YFC's Steward of 3Story 2004-2007, quoted from various YFC training handouts and brochures, 2006.

<sup>110</sup>Eugene Peterson, *Tell It Slant* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 134.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 154.

*Celtic Way of Evangelism, How Christianity Can Reach the West ... Again.* In contrast to typical American evangelical models, which look very much like the logical, Roman way of ministry consisting of “presentation, decision, and assimilation,”<sup>112</sup> the Celtic model for reaching people is more relevant for the UCC. Hunter suggests that establishing community is the priority, followed by engaging in conversation, ministry, prayer, and worship, and “in time ... you invite them to believe.”<sup>113</sup> Hunter emphasizes nine characteristics of the Celtic approach to reaching people,<sup>114</sup> each of which provides support to a morphing UCC approach to evangelism. His ancient sources and the fruit of St. Patrick’s outreach provide healthy roots for a way of life approach to evangelism that includes storytelling, sincere listening, and mutual conversation.

The first characteristic is a belief that human life “can be deeply enriched by living in covenant with creation as well as Creator.”<sup>115</sup> Hunter stresses human kinship with nature in contrast to the Roman way of conquering nature. An “indifferent, detached, impersonal approach ... opened the way for Western humanity’s domination and exploitation of nature – which Celtic Christians would have regarded as sinful.”<sup>116</sup> The Celtic and the UCC commitments to loving and restoring the earth are crucial for twenty-first century efforts to reach the “new barbarians.”<sup>117</sup>

---

<sup>112</sup>George G. Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West--Again* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 53.

<sup>113</sup>*Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>114</sup>The nine characteristics paraphrase Hunter’s summary of the Celtic way, exemplified by Saint Patrick’s ministry to reach 150 Celtic tribes of Ireland between the years 425-460.

<sup>115</sup>Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 88.

<sup>116</sup>*Ibid.*, 87.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, 96.



The second distinctive is the optimistic Celtic doctrine of human nature. Patrick saw human nature as twisted and blurred by sin, while simultaneously allowing space to honor the achievements of people who did not yet know Jesus Christ. In Patrick's day, Augustinian theology often discounted all non-Christian achievements as originating in totally depraved beings that could do no good, leaving little room for God's grace to spill out into all of human life. The contrast between Patrick and Augustine is stark. "For Augustine, Jesus Christ saves us by rescuing us from sin and the consequences of the Fall. For the Celtic apostles, Jesus Christ also comes to complete his good creation."<sup>118</sup> This difference has important implications for evangelism and connects theologically and practically within the UCC tradition. Allowing for both the experience of rescue and that of being completed is much more congruent with Sixth Avenue's understanding of the work of Jesus Christ and the expansive story of God's work in the world. Patrick's understanding of the essential goodness of human nature lays the foundation for a UCC-friendly model of evangelism.

The remaining seven characteristics of the Celtic way are also relevant for Sixth Avenue UCC. Hunter calls attention next to God's immanence, God's presence in the present moment for all people. Sixth Avenue responds well to the God who knows them; the God who relates to their friends, family members, and neighbors; the God who wants to be with them. The fourth characteristic is the Celtic understanding of God's power. God's dynamic interest and work in everyday life and in the world around us is highlighted. In addition to God's ability to create order and stability in a theoretical or historical sense, is God's active, present power in the world. Next, is an understanding of

---

<sup>118</sup>Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 90.

organizations. While Roman Christians preserved institutions and traditions, Celtic Christians worked to advance the Kingdom through community, using flatter organizations, more diversity of people, in particular, women in leadership and ministering in teams.

The sixth distinctive of the Celtic way regards the place of culture in evangelism. Romans, like many American evangelicals see themselves today, saw Roman culture as superior to all others, while Celts worked within indigenous cultural structures to spread the gospel. Patrick viewed each culture as both under God's judgment and containing examples of God's truth. The Celtic way of relating to other forms of religion is the seventh distinctive. Celtic Christians perceived indigenous religions as proof of spiritual hunger and need. Because they saw Jesus as the fulfillment of all human spiritual need, the Celts used each cultural context to identify natural opportunities, doorways, or entry points for the gospel. Eighth is communication. Celtic missionaries applied a right-brained, imaginative approach to evangelism, using visual images, stories, analogy, and poetry to proclaim Christ. The final distinctive of the Celtic way of evangelism relates to mission. Celtic Christians welcomed outsiders into monastic communities before they believed, inviting people to join their orders of prayer, discipline, worship, service, etc. Wandering missionary bands formed new communities of prayer where people came to faith and then another new community of Christian faith was nurtured.

Hunter's "naïve confidence"<sup>119</sup> and vision for the possibility that "Christianity can become contagious once more across North America and Europe in the twenty-first

---

<sup>119</sup>Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 12.

century”<sup>120</sup> represents my own vision. Applying the characteristics of the Celtic way of life and faith may position Sixth Avenue on the edge of revival within the denomination and beyond on behalf of those who do not yet follow in the way of the risen Christ. In contrast with the modern American, evangelical, one-way presentation of the good news, the Celtic way and the growing way of ministry in the UCC is best demonstrated by engagement in “two-way conversation”<sup>121</sup> in order to understand the people being drawn into the story of the good news. The hope is that, through dialogue and understanding, they will know, feel, and experience the God who understands and loves them.

***The Authentic Witness: Credibility and Authority***

**by C. Norman Kraus**

In the fifth book under review, *The Authentic Witness: Credibility and Authority*, C. Norman Kraus writes that “neither conservative nor liberal Protestantism has reckoned seriously with the criterion of authenticity in life and strategy as a crucial mark of churchly identification.”<sup>122</sup> His reference to authenticity in strategy and life correlates with the idea that a distinct way of life patterned after the way Jesus lived provides solid grounding for authentic Christian witness. The life of Jesus, as the chief exemplar of evangelism well done, is the dominant pattern for the case presented in this paper. Kraus says it this way: “Incarnation is the shape of Christian witness...”<sup>123</sup> As Jesus emptied himself on our behalf, he did so through “association, involvement, mutuality, dialogue,

---

<sup>120</sup>Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 12.

<sup>121</sup>*Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>122</sup>C. Norman Kraus, *The Authentic Witness: Credibility and Authority* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1979), 10.

<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*, 31.

and vulnerability.”<sup>124</sup> Vulnerability implies a willingness to be changed. Only a message bringer willing to be influenced by the message receiver is capable of true dialogue.

Jesus’ ways of being vulnerable, surrendering, and emptying himself can also be our way. The Church is called to share Christ’s mission and would do well to imitate his approach. The UCC is not interested in a literal imitation of Jesus Christ, but rather in sharing the style and mission of Jesus. The mission of Jesus summarized by Kraus is “to expand the circle of disciples in authentic community under the new covenant. The authenticating principle is a new life of discipleship in the community of the Spirit.”<sup>125</sup> His way consists of relational patterns exemplified in the stories of his encounters with people throughout the four gospels and Acts. For Sixth Avenue’s witness to be authentic, it must retain the fundamental character of the original witness, Jesus Christ.

For Sixth Avenue or any church wishing to engage in gospel witness in the twenty-first century, Kraus gently guides Christ followers toward what is necessary for fruitful gospel witness.

The life of the community is not a life for itself but rather for the world. The Church is the servant of Jesus Christ for the world. The [Church’s] mandate forms the community and gives it coherence. The community continues the basic stance of Christ’s ministry and mission. The community is the continuance of his introductory ministry. The community is anticipatory and shares Christ’s openness in the world. The Church is expendable, maintains a posture of defenselessness in the world and shares with Jesus a broad concern for the whole of human life.<sup>126</sup>

The broad concerns of Jesus, along with a high Christology, are maintained in the UCC and are consistent with Hunter, Brueggemann, Peterson, and Walls and Ross. Evangelism

---

<sup>124</sup>Kraus, *The Authentic Witness*, 40-47.

<sup>125</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>126</sup>*Ibid.*, 184-190.

in the UCC may well be defined as embodied presence or as a living practice of courageous witness in all of life and work contained within a strong focus on the centrality of Jesus. Because Christ came to “a dangerously hurting, yet deeply hope-shaped world,”<sup>127</sup> and the witness of Sixth Avenue exists in a similar environment, “presence is one of the profound forms of Christian witness.”<sup>128</sup> Christology is the central organizing principle for the style and approach to evangelism championed by this paper. Concerning persons bringing the message, the “one who will not be present to and for the neighbor cannot effectively witness to that neighbor, even though witness consists in a good deal more than presence alone.”<sup>129</sup>

Kraus’s perspective on witness, μάρτυς, and specifically the Bible as witness is also useful in the UCC. Various forms of μάρτυς occur in the New Testament one hundred times. The meaning of the nominative noun implies a person who attests to established facts “legally (Matthew 26:65); generally, as one who testifies to something (Romans 1:9), as one who declares facts directly known to himself from firsthand knowledge (Acts 1:22) or from firsthand experience (Hebrews 12:1); as one who tells what he believes, even though it results in his being killed for it as a witness or martyr” (Acts 1:8; Revelation 17:6)<sup>130</sup> Credibility and authenticity go hand-in-hand with the meaning and form of witness to which this paper is dedicated.

---

<sup>127</sup>James William McClendon, *Ethics* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 55.

<sup>128</sup>*Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>129</sup>*Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>130</sup>T. Friberg, B. Friberg, and N. F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, vol. 4 in *Baker’s Greek New Testament Library* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000), 254.

Kraus captures this meaning and promotes witness from the vantage point of authenticity when he writes, “Authentic witness does not impose; it shares.”<sup>131</sup>

Credibility is an alternative descriptor of witness for the UCC. “Credible witnesses can testify only to what they know is true based upon their actual experience. We have to live what we say we believe so we can verify the truth of the Gospel on a personal level.”<sup>132</sup>

Witness is used as both noun and verb throughout the paper while avoiding the use of the word *μάπτω* in reference to individualistic techniques or systems executed as evangelism.

Additionally, the nature of the Bible as witness is not to be taken literally or legalistically, but rather in light of a necessary, on-going interpretation in the culture. Kraus’s understanding of the Bible is congruent with Sixth Avenue’s. The Scriptures are part of the original witness to the truth and as such must be translated in different settings requiring that we state the truth differently in different cultures. The guide to contextualizing the biblical witness is the witness of Jesus Christ, in tandem with the Holy Spirit as the agent for communication. The discerning community then provides theological work done in the culture, not outside of or on behalf of the culture.

Lastly, Kraus views the authentic community of the Church as a sign of the Kingdom, a healing community within the world, living the law of love for a holistic witness to the lordship of Christ over all. This form of witness is not simply a verbal proclamation, but also calls the world to repent and accept the rule and reign of Christ in their lives and in the world at large. The Church, therefore, exists not for itself but for the

---

<sup>131</sup>Kraus, *The Authentic Witness*, 10.

<sup>132</sup>McNeil, *A Credible Witness*, 2008, 24.

life of the world, as the servant of and the witness to Jesus Christ. This paper implies practical links between evangelism and reconciliation, requiring that there be a social, communal element to evangelism. “To choose Christ is to choose his community.”<sup>133</sup>

### *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*

**by Martha Grace Reese**

Martha Grace Reese is next in the line-up of conversation partners informing evangelism practices for the twenty-first century. In *Unbinding the Gospel*, Reese presented the results of a national, four-year assessment of hundreds of local congregations, *the Mainline Evangelism Project*. She reported on best practices in faith sharing of five mainline denominations, including the UCC, and established her conclusions from 1200 interviews with laypeople: church members, new Christians, and teenagers in youth groups, along with interviews from pastors, professors, seminarians, and denominational headquarters personnel. Her efforts focused on “the beliefs, motivations, and actions of 150 of the mainline churches that are doing the best job reaching people with no church background.”<sup>134</sup>

Reese’s most important finding “that a vivid relationship with God lies at the heart of real evangelism”<sup>135</sup> plus her discovery that highly effective evangelism occurred in churches all over the theological spectrum, provide hopeful signs that the radical diversity of the UCC may position the denomination to engage its laypeople in faith sharing that displays profoundly fruitful results. Christian witness arising naturally out of

---

<sup>133</sup>McNeil, *A Credible Witness*, 16-17.

<sup>134</sup>Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 4.

<sup>135</sup>*Ibid.*

vibrant relationships with God has implications for how the UCC might plan better for effective evangelism. The findings of Reese unearth a deep ethos found in churches that are fruitful in their witness to the good news. “Faith has to be real. Faith has to go as deeply into the holy mystery of life with God as we can stand. We are invited into give-it-all-away, bet-the-farm, choreographed-by-the-Spirit, life-walking-by-Christ’s-side in minute-by-minute miraculous glory.”<sup>136</sup>

One main concern of this paper is to engage laypeople at Sixth Avenue in a journey of finding and strengthening faith in Christ. The strategy outlined in Part Three is shaped significantly by a guiding assumption closely linked to the work of Reese. The guiding assumption of this paper is that people who genuinely find faith in Jesus Christ and who want to grow more deeply in relationship with God, will desire one day to share their faith in Christ. The likelihood of being asked about one’s faith is high, particularly if those who follow Christ are living the way of love. Peter reminds the Church to keep Christ Lord of our lives “and if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way” (1 Pet. 3:15-16 NLT).

Reese encourages mainline churches to learn new practices of evangelism by entering the path from any possible starting point because “the Spirit of God seems to be doing something in the mainline churches [where she recognizes] a pattern of movement toward life and health and an overflowing of the Gospel...” This paper proposes an unapologetically Christo-centric paradigm for faith sharing and operates best within a community committed to a high Christology. With the stories of Jesus as the starting point and the pattern for evangelism, this paper offers one possible entrance into

---

<sup>136</sup>Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel*, 106.



Christian witness. *Unbinding the Gospel* and the strategy presented here insist that focusing on the work of prayer and paying attention to the work of the Spirit is at the heart of church communities that thrive as communities of outreach to those outside the walls of the church.

***Godbearing: Evangelism Reconceived***

**by Elaine A. Robinson**

The seventh conversation partner, Elaine A. Robinson, in *God Bearing: Evangelism Reconceived* provides further support for the work of evangelism in mainline churches like the UCC. Concerning the use of the word *euangelion* or *euangelizo*, Robinson suggests this is the appropriate starting point for redefining and reclaiming the word evangelism, but she also asserts that a more full account must be offered. She makes a case that the New Testament invites human beings into a gospel that is “about a radically relational reality; when the word is proclaimed and received, it forms us into a community of Christ.”<sup>137</sup> In order to address further concerns related to the nature and definition of the good news to which twenty-first century Christ-followers bear witness, Robinson writes, “The fullest understanding of the good news lies in a complicated dance of meaning among these and other words and phrases in the writings of the New Testament.”<sup>138</sup> *Godbearing* maintains that the gospel is more than information about God, more than an announcement of good news about Jesus Christ and humanity. Robinson expands the evangelism conversation, reminding followers of Christ that the

---

<sup>137</sup>Elaine A. Robinson, *Godbearing, Evangelism Reconceived* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 48-49.

<sup>138</sup>*Ibid.*, 62

gospel includes God, humanity, and creation, a stunning dance of liberation, reconciliation, and recreation.

Robinson's work reinforces my own rejection of two issues related to evangelism. First, she implies that the language of evangelism be reshaped and that mainline churches lead the way in disregarding language that focuses on winning people to the Lord, or winning people for Christ. Second, while she acknowledges that some Christian circles offer evangelism as the solution to the decline of Christianity in North America, her intention is not to "put a band aid on a broken leg or a broken heart,"<sup>139</sup> For Robinson as well as for this paper, numerical growth is not the goal of Christian witness. She makes a case for a theology and practice of evangelism that moves the Church toward a more genuine embodiment and expression of the good news of Jesus Christ, which she conceives as Godbearing.

The book finds a center in "the Christian practice of Godbearing...Christ who is the content of the gospel message is the prototypical Godbearer and the basis for reawakening us to the ways of God in the world."<sup>140</sup> Godbearing calls Christians to orient their lives toward bearing the "renewed image of God within, bearing witness or bearing faithful witness to God, and bearing suffering or bearing with Christ the world's suffering."<sup>141</sup> The case is made also for the biblical superiority of love and the call to

---

<sup>139</sup>Robinson, *Godbearing*, 6.

<sup>140</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>141</sup>*Ibid.*, 85.

followers of Christ to be present in the world as “agents of God at work in the world”<sup>142</sup> and, I would add, as ambassadors of God’s love for the world.

***Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve***

**by Richard V. Peace**

Richard Peace, the next conversation partner, provides a thorough study of conversion from Acts and Mark in *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*. His work is examined in some detail throughout the paper for three reasons. First, he sees the chief purpose of Mark to be evangelistic, thus assisting my learning process concerning the way the message of the good news might be offered in the context of Sixth Avenue. Second, he discovers in Mark that the disciples themselves are evangelized by Jesus, making Jesus our primary teacher with respect to how the good news is delivered and the disciples our teachers with respect to how the good news is received. Third, Peace makes a clear distinction between encounter evangelism, referring to “those methods of outreach which seek to bring about in the lives of people Pauline-like encounters with Jesus,”<sup>143</sup> and the experiences of the twelve disciples as examples of process evangelism. For purposes related to the UCC, the term “process evangelism [as] outreach that seeks to assist others to continue on in their spiritual pilgrimages so that they eventually become conscious disciples of Jesus”<sup>144</sup> is better suited than encounter evangelism.

---

<sup>142</sup>Robinson, *Godbearing*, 83.

<sup>143</sup>Richard Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub., 1999), 287.

<sup>144</sup>*Ibid.*

Two potential paths for beginning to follow Jesus serve as distinct options for how people enter relationship with Jesus Christ and Christian community. Peace writes with a concern for both as valid experiences of conversion.

Christian conversion is not a generalized movement of transformation within the context of one's relationships to other people and to the world around one. It involves new insight into God, new turning toward God, and a new life lived in response to God. It involves seeing oneself in the light of God's truth, embracing a new relationship with God, and living this out within the community of God's peoples as a servant and witness to all people.<sup>145</sup>

Dangers exist within both experiences of conversion. Peace suggests that "the danger of process evangelism is that people are always questing after but never finding God, much less giving their allegiance to Jesus."<sup>146</sup> The possible danger in encounter evangelism is that converted people may stop questioning, seeking, or even trusting the person of Jesus Christ because they place their faith in the initial encounter with God.

Of particular interest to evangelism as a way of life filled with story telling, listening, service, and conversation is Richard Peace's understating of Mark's use of the phrase "on the way." *εν τη οδω* functions for Mark as a summary of discipleship.

Mark uses the term *hodos* some seven times Mark 8:27 – 10:52. By using the phrase *εν τη οδω* in this way, Mark conveys the fact that to be a disciple is, literally, to follow Jesus. He deliberately sets the discussion of discipleship...in the context of an actual journey from Caesarea Philippi to Jerusalem...The Twelve are well along the Way...but they do not yet understand. This is the missing piece of the puzzle. In particular, they have yet to understand about his death and resurrection.<sup>147</sup>

---

<sup>145</sup>Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 101.

<sup>146</sup>*Ibid.*, 303.

<sup>147</sup>*Ibid.*, 268.

To be εν τη οδῷ with Jesus is the journey into which we invite people to live life with God. On the road with Jesus is a way of life that includes biblical formation, careful storytelling, focused listening, and attentive conversation. This way of life produces fruitful Christian witness that invites other human beings to come face to face with the strong, loving person of Jesus Christ.

### *Stories with Intent*

**Klyne R. Snodgrass**

*Stories with Intent* by Klyne R. Snodgrass, the final book reviewed, focuses on the parables of Jesus, which are “among the best known and most influential stories in the world. Even if people know nothing about Jesus, they either know about his stories or have encountered their impact in expressions like ‘prodigal’ or ‘good Samaritan.’”<sup>148</sup> Jesus is the master storyteller. Story creates common ground, and human beings are caught up naturally in a good story. Stories, especially those of Jesus, capture our imagination by constructing new worlds for us to explore and experience.

Snodgrass’ treatment of how parables are to be interpreted is especially insightful for evangelism ministry in the UCC. “The primary stance in interpreting is the willingness to hear and respond appropriately.”<sup>149</sup> He insists that each parable must be read and understood on its own terms, “not with some predetermined view as to what parables must look like and do.”<sup>150</sup> Emphasis on the role of listening and hearing leads

---

<sup>148</sup>Klyne R. Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008), 1.

<sup>149</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>150</sup>*Ibid.*

the way in interpreting the parables of Jesus. *Stories with Intent* provides a gold mine of tools for the work of digging into the texts of Jesus' parables and deciphering his intent for the first century and for each century following. A few careful practices for interpreting the parable texts are worth noting briefly. Later in the book, the author thoroughly expands and applies these to many of the parables of Jesus.

Analyze each parable thoroughly.... We must seek to hear a parable as Jesus' Palestinian hearers would have heard it .... Determine specifically the function of the story in the teaching of Jesus .... Interpret what is given not what is omitted .... Do not impose real [chronological] time on parable time .... Pay particular attention to the rule of end stress .... If you cannot validate the teaching you think is in the parable from nonparabolic material elsewhere in the Gospels, you are most certainly wrong .... Determine the theological intent and significance of the parable.<sup>151</sup>

Snodgrass' insistence that "we do not have the *ipissima verba*, the very words of Jesus,"<sup>152</sup> but rather that the gospels have been shaped by the evangelists' styles and by their communities is not a threat to the validity of the content or intent of Jesus. Because the UCC as a denomination historically has rejected a literal view of the Bible being the precise words of God, Snodgrass' perspective is welcomed in the UCC. The Gospels are "direct communication written for a broad audience to convey material about the teaching and life of Jesus in order to create followers of Jesus."<sup>153</sup>

In light of the gospels' obsession with developing faithful, fruitful Christ followers, and in light of the power of the stories of Jesus to create the kind of environment where people respond and choose to follow him, the next chapter investigates six of Jesus' stories, including one parable. Unselfconscious sharing of the

---

<sup>151</sup>Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 25-31.

<sup>152</sup>Ibid., 33.

<sup>153</sup>Ibid.

good news in the normal course of everyday life is the vision ahead. The stage has been set to proceed with a study of Jesus as the most powerful evangelist, modeling and teaching a way of life that consistently includes a conversational, story-centered approach to Christian witness.

We learn from Jesus that evangelism often begins as a conversation where two people's stories intersect: the message bringer and the potential message receiver. Evangelism involves conversations between a message bringer and a message receiver unfolding within three sets of relationships: one of whom may not yet have chosen intentionally to follow Jesus Christ, one of whom is on the way with Jesus Christ, and God, who is relating to each of them while they relate to one another.<sup>154</sup> Evangelism must include conversation about God: where God is, who God is, and how God wants to live with us. Evangelism is also a conversation about love: human beings consciously living life in relation to ourselves, to other people, to God, and to the world around us, and then making choices consistent with love.

The choice to follow Jesus "is very important because who we are and where we stand will depend on our choice."<sup>155</sup> In order to be formed into a person, a human being must be organized around a life giving center; therefore, evangelism must go beyond moralism, religious tradition, or plans for church growth.

Evangelism has been infected by the desire to package things for easy consumption. Conversion...is about soul making because an initial conversion experience, while often real and authentic, is more often unfinished and incomplete. There is always more of Jesus Christ to know, more of myself to know and more of me to surrender to Christ. Conversion cannot be a once and for

---

<sup>154</sup>Jennifer L. Morgan, summarizing the overlapping stories of the 3Story approach to evangelism.

<sup>155</sup>Alan W. Jones, *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989), 148.

all event, even for Paul. It is rather a way that spiritual formation takes shape; it is a whole lifelong process, a journey to and with God.<sup>156</sup>

Jones finds fault in a “veiled vindictiveness at the heart of much of the Church’s evangelism.” He writes, “There is nothing to prevent my hoping that hell is empty. Christian orthodoxy, while it does require that I believe in the logical possibility of hell or utter lostness or utter damnation, does not require that I believe that anyone is there.”<sup>157</sup>

On behalf of the UCC, the meanings this paper avoids while using the word evangelism include finger pointing, soul winning, winning people to Christ, getting people into heaven, and “religious confrontation that arises more out of anger and judgment than out of love and hope.”<sup>158</sup> Finally, the transfer of religious or spiritual information is not intended when using the word evangelism. While exchanges of information occur in the process of evangelism, and a level of understanding is necessary for finding faith, evangelism is the work of transferring and offering the actual person of Jesus Christ to another human being. From the insights, conclusions, and limitations of the preceding literature review and with respectful gratitude to my nine conversation partners, the paper transitions into careful exegetical examination of some of the dialogue and relationships Jesus initiated.

---

<sup>156</sup>Jones, *Soul Making*, 160-169.

<sup>157</sup>*Ibid.*, 172-182.

<sup>158</sup>Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 301.



## CHAPTER 4

### STORIES OF JESUS AS THE LEADING PARADIGM FOR WITNESSING

Chapter 4 addresses the way of Jesus by exploring his personal encounters with people. Six stories of Jesus provide a theological lens through which Sixth Avenue UCC can rediscover a useful model for evangelism. Biblical reflection begins by listening to two conversations: Jesus with a lawyer in Luke 10:25-37 and Jesus with a Samaritan woman in John 4:1-42, and continues by making observations about two healings: Jesus heals Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52 and Jesus receives the Samaritan leper in Luke 17:11-19. Biblical reflection also includes the examination of two relationships: Jesus with Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10 and Jesus with Nicodemus in John 3:1-21, 7:40-52, and 19:38-42.

In recognizing that the stories of Jesus have multiple layers of meaning, I narrow the focus in order to make observations that link naturally to evangelism. The intention of this chapter is not to answer every important question raised in each story. Rather, I aim to show that the awe and shock of the stories of Jesus can change the nature of evangelism and how lay people are best motivated and trained to share their faith. The six passages do not prescribe specific methods for Christian outreach. Jesus as the model, however, expands Christian witness to be the “visible expression of hospitality and

sharing in the warm welcome of inclusive redeeming love.”<sup>159</sup> Aligned with the patterns of Jesus, evangelism is given a fresh rewrap on behalf of ordinary followers of Christ who interact with frequently uninterested, regularly unimpressed, and often unconvinced friends and family members.

The six stories share much in common, with a few important distinctions. Each of the interactions includes conversation in which Jesus engaged intentionally. The conversations of Jesus with the lawyer and with the Samaritan woman are distinguished from the others because the dialogue unfolds organically as Jesus offers himself as a conversation partner. Each of the six stories can be loosely categorized as healings in that each person experiences formative change, growth, or transformation with Jesus Christ at the center. Specific to the story of Bartimaeus and the Samaritan leper are distinct physical healings. Each of the six stories also can be classified as the development of a relationship with Jesus in that each person’s encounter has the potential to create an ongoing, life-long experience with Jesus Christ. Of the six stories examined, those of Zacchaeus and Nicodemus display distinct evidence of continuing relationship as a result of their experiences with Jesus. From these encounters with Jesus, conclusions are drawn for empowering the effective witness of lay followers of Christ.

### **Jesus in Conversation with a Lawyer in Luke 10:25-37**

The framing of a theological lens for evangelism begins with a conversation. Describing the path of discipleship and enabling would-be disciples to follow in the way

---

<sup>159</sup>Quoted from Dr. David Augsburg’s Doctor of Ministry Course Evaluation and Grade Form following CN710 Summer 2008, “The Call to Soul-Making and Soul-Mending” (course evaluation, Fuller Theological Seminary, December 23, 2008).

of Jesus, the parable inside the Luke 10:25-37 conversation elaborates and expands on the love commands in the Old Testament (Lev. 19:18, Deut. 6:5, Isa. 58:6-10, and Mic. 6:8). The precise story is not found in the other gospels. There are, however, closely related discussions about the love command (Matt. 22:34-40 and Mark 12:28-34) and similar conversations with a rich young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22, Mark 10:17-22, and Luke 18:18-23.

<sup>25</sup>And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup>He said to him, “What is written in the Law? How do you read it?” <sup>27</sup>And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself.” <sup>28</sup>And he said to him, “You have answered correctly; do this, and you will live.”

<sup>29</sup>But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup>Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup>Now by chance a priest was going down that road, and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup>So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup>But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was, and when he saw him, he had compassion. <sup>34</sup>He went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he set him on his own animal and brought him to an inn and took care of him. <sup>35</sup>And the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him, and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ <sup>36</sup>Which of these three, do you think, proved to be a neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” <sup>37</sup>He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” And Jesus said to him, “You go, and do likewise” (Luke 10:25-37).<sup>160</sup>

It is useful to understand Eugene’s Peterson’s phrase, “the conversational Jesus.”<sup>161</sup> Distinguishing between Jesus the preacher who proclaims the Kingdom of God, or Jesus the teacher who instructs and engages potential students in new ways of thinking and living, in Luke’s gospel, one discovers Jesus the conversationalist. Jesus

---

<sup>160</sup>All Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society, 2001) unless otherwise noted.

<sup>161</sup>Peterson, *Tell It Slant*, 10.

speaks “informally in conversational give-and-take”<sup>162</sup> and addresses ordinary life situation. The casual nature of the conversational Jesus provides strategic modeling for the task of equipping lay people for Christian witness. Luke’s story requires contextual attention prior to drawing conclusions about the dialogue in which we discover Jesus listening, answering questions, and asking questions.

The parable contained in the conversation is situated near the beginning of ten stories unique to Luke. Peterson writes, “A parable is not ordinarily used to tell us something new but ... to get us to take seriously something we have dismissed as unimportant because we have never seen the point of it. Before we know it we are involved.”<sup>163</sup> The lessons of a parable are generally kept at a distance while preconceived notions and stereotypical prejudices are exposed. Peterson likes to make the point that “a parable comes up on the listener obliquely, on the slant.”<sup>164</sup> Luke’s travel narrative sets the stage for the swapping of stories in everyday life, making use of non-religious, common language to talk about profound spiritual realities.

To grasp more thoroughly the intent of the conversation and the possible application to evangelism, six key words critical to interpretation are explored: νομικός (lawyer), εκπειράζων (test), αγαπήσεις (love), πλησίον (neighbor), Σαμαρίτης (Samaritan), ελεος (mercy). The first word, νομικός, is generally interpreted as a lawyer specializing not in secular law but in the Jewish religious law. νομικός is the equivalent of a first century Bible Scholar. The second key word, εκπειράζων, to test, opened up the

---

<sup>162</sup>Peterson, *Tell It Slant*, 10.

<sup>163</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>164</sup>Ibid., 20.

initial connection between the two men. The lawyer challenged Jesus Christ. The scholar's question may have been an intended trap or a genuine question appropriate to his area of expertise or an attempt to justify himself, but Jesus quickly drained any aggressive confrontation from their interaction and responded with a clarifying question: "What is written in the law; how do you, the expert, read it?"

Jesus engaged in an ongoing dialogue and initiated potential mutuality in their conversation. The dialogue proceeded as the scholar answered Jesus with a concise, accurate summary of the Law of Moses: love God and love your neighbor from Deut. 6:5 and Lev. 19:18. His answer introduced the third key word as the future, indicative, active verb to love, *αγαπήσεις*, which Jesus insisted required action, not simply academic understanding. The conversation intensified as the centrality of love became the centerpiece of the test. Jesus offered that the lawyer could have the life he was asking for if he would love God and love his neighbor.

The fourth key word, *πλησίον*, translated as neighbor, means "any other person, and where two are concerned, the other (thy fellow man, thy neighbour), according to the Jews, any member of the Hebrew race and commonwealth, according to Christ, any other man [human being] irrespective of race or religion with whom we live or whom we chance to meet."<sup>165</sup> The lawyer was first in the conversation to mention the word *πλησίον*, twice prior to Jesus' parable. Jesus affirmed him for this answer, even though Luke comments negatively on the lawyer's motive of justifying himself when he asked, "Who is my neighbor?" (10:29). Jesus moved quickly to the issue the lawyer was missing

---

<sup>165</sup>J. Strong, *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, electronic ed. (Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996), G4139.

by telling a simple, clear, disarming story that served to invite the lawyer's participation in the story.

Jesus' parable of the merciful Samaritan (10:30-37) destroyed the accepted norm for who a neighbor is and demonstrated that asking, "Who is my neighbor?" may be the wrong question. The great commandment, "though these words are never used, turns out to be the love of enemies. Jesus had already made this clear in Luke 6:27-36, while in Matthew 5:43-48 it was also love for enemies that made a disciple 'perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect' (5:48; cf. 19:21)."<sup>166</sup> The lawyer's question must never be asked. A human being is a neighbor. Defining one's neighbor is not possible; one can only be a neighbor. "Nearness and need define neighbor."<sup>167</sup> The parable likely answers an identity-driven question concerning who am I as opposed to who is my neighbor.

The parable within the conversation unfolded as a story about a man walking from Jerusalem to Jericho on a trail that descends at least thirty-three hundred feet and more than fifteen miles through the wilderness where theft and murder were common. Brutally beaten, stripped, and robbed, the victim was deserted three times, once by the overt perpetrators, next by a priest, and finally by a Levite. The priest and Levite, like the Samaritan, saw the man lying on the ground. The first two responded out of "caution and self-protection, while for the Samaritan seeing is the source of compassion which motivates his helping."<sup>168</sup> The focus of conversation was the Samaritan who surfaced as the story's unlikely hero.

---

<sup>166</sup>J. B. Green, S. McKnight, and I. H. Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 134.

<sup>167</sup>Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 357.

<sup>168</sup>Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 344.

The word πλησίον, neighbor, continued to have significance as Jesus reframed the incident connecting Σαμαρίτης, Samaritan, the fifth key word in the conversation, back to πλησίον. The depth of bad feelings between Jews and Samaritans came from a deeply held mutual racism and religious prejudice. General dislike and mistrust existed between Samaritans and Jews due to “several hundred years of bad blood between them. They neither liked nor trusted one another.”<sup>169</sup> The historical rift between Jews and Samaritans was wide.

Jews believed Samaritans to be people of doubtful descent and inadequate theology. They were thought to be descendents of people brought by the Assyrians (and other conquerors) to colonize the land. They were monotheistic, accepted only the Torah, and argued that the true temple was on Mount Gerizim. Samaritans and Jews had notoriously bad relations.<sup>170</sup>

The final question in the conversation came from Jesus, who asked which human being in the story was neighbor to the one attacked. The reversal in the neighbor-identity discussion introduced the final of six key words. “Jesus’ story did not define neighbor. It created a neighbor.”<sup>171</sup> Jesus smashed walls separating people and elevated a despised, marginalized person as the one to emulate. It is not as yet known how the story concluded. The interested reader is left curious and wondering, only able to guess the outcomes. Did the lawyer become a neighbor and extend his knowledge of the love command into his experience? This resistant scholar turned conversationalist reluctantly answered Jesus’ question by saying “The one who showed mercy,” to which Jesus instructed, “You go and do likewise.”

---

<sup>169</sup>Peterson, *Tell It Slant*, 15.

<sup>170</sup>Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 345.

<sup>171</sup>Peterson, *Tell It Slant*, 42.

The sixth and final key word, the noun *ἐλεος*, refers to “mercy, compassion ... and especially to gracious action demonstrating God’s compassion, mercy, lovingkindness, [and] faithfulness.”<sup>172</sup> It may also denote “the kindness owed in mutual relationships.”<sup>173</sup> The lawyer should have known this kind of active love, just as present day followers of God should know. The lawyer responded, but did not name the actual neighbor who helped the one violated; rather he classified the Samaritan as the embodiment of *ἐλεος*.

Snodgrass writes of the parable portion of Jesus’ conversation with the lawyer as being a framework for defining personal identity. If identity formation is at the core of the parable, then Jesus provides a potential answer to the question *who am I* rather than *who is my neighbor*. If a Samaritan knows how to love and care for the stranger in his midst, how could a religious leader not know? Jesus turns the tables on the lawyer. Those who genuinely listen to the parable would find their lives turned upside down. A new structure for living would emerge. The parable points to action as an expression of a person’s identity in relation to the Creator, “a relation of love with God that gives us our identity and reflects that love to others.”<sup>174</sup> It is intended to re-orient the listener and to show that “love does not allow limits on the definition of neighbor.”<sup>175</sup>

The conversation does not make explicit how to love one’s neighbor, but it does create “a reality that challenges our passivity and self-interest. Loving the neighbor as

---

<sup>172</sup>Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*, 143.

<sup>173</sup>Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 223.

<sup>174</sup>Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, 359.

<sup>175</sup>*Ibid.*, 357.



oneself is difficult, but no alternative is allowed for the followers of Jesus.”<sup>176</sup>

Evangelism emerges as a way of life, the path of following Jesus as a faithful, humble, authentic neighbor. Luke’s recollection of the conversation between the lawyer and Jesus pulls necessary insight and powerful guidance from a compassionate Samaritan.

Since the conversation is intended to teach about the love command and since the command is central to Jesus, further attention must be paid to describing *αγάπη*. Jesus makes a connection between the call to love one’s neighbor (Lev. 19:18) and the call to love God in Deuteronomy 6:5. Jesus goes as far as to fuse these two into one great commandment, the law of love. In order to sharpen the theological lens, fuller consideration is given to the way of love, “the most excellent way” introduced in 1 Corinthians 12:31b. The beauty, simplicity, and power of the way of love provide rich evangelism practices for followers of Christ. The depth and intensity of love’s description allows for life-long, ongoing transformation into the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. This transformative love provides the frame inside which a full picture of evangelism can be contained.

The absolute supremacy of *η αγάπη* (love) as the guiding way of life for followers of Christ is key to the broader theology of 1 Corinthians 13. Set in the context of spiritual gifts in Corinth, *η αγάπη* is not another spiritual gift; it is not another anything. In a category of its own, *η αγάπη* shines as the supreme way of life for all who would follow Jesus Christ. Throughout all of Scripture, *η αγάπη* is the primary posture of God toward God’s creation and of God’s people toward God, as well as toward each

---

<sup>176</sup>Ibid., 362.

other, neighbors, friends, and enemies. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the LORD” (Lev. 19:18).

Followers of Christ are called to live lives of love, integrating η αγάπη throughout all of their lives. In Romans 13:8-10 and Galatians 5:13-14, η αγάπη is the fulfillment of the law and the only debt Christ followers are to sustain. Love of neighbor is the summation of all the other commandments. In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15, Paul explains that, because of Jesus’ death and resurrection for the world, Christians are full with η αγάπη, therefore enabling Christ followers to live for Christ who died for all people rather than to live selfishly. Ephesians 3:14-19 reveals that the power coming from Christian love inflates our hearts, thus expanding our capacity to grasp more fully the love of Christ for people and for the world. This love surpasses all knowledge.

We who follow Christ are to be filled to fullness with η αγάπη, which is far more than ethereal, abstract, poetic material. Jesus’ earthly existence was saturated with η αγάπη in his life, ministry, death, and resurrection. This η αγάπη is the actual fabric of life for those who aspire to be with Jesus. In addition, Jesus asked us (Mark 12:28-34 and further expanded in Luke 10:25-37) to love our neighbor as an expression of loving the Father. In Luke 6:27-36 Jesus takes η αγάπη even further when he asks us to love our enemies. The Scriptures call us to a theology and a life that are grounded in the uncompromising realities of love, beginning with the startling awareness that the One who calls us to love, first loved us personally, unconditionally, and eternally (1 John 4:7-21). God knows us and loves us fully now. We will also know God fully, face to face in a future time.

The most excellent way of love in 1 Corinthians is a reflection of the person of Christ. The personality of love, therefore, is embodied in Jesus Christ. Gordon Fee suggests substituting “His name for the noun, love,”<sup>177</sup> in order to grasp more fully what true Christian love is all about. Fee further encourages the insertion of one’s own name in the place of η αγάπη. This application enables the follower of Christ to live in and practice often the most excellent way of love, our way of life, and the Jesus way of life. As η αγάπη is the very nature of Christ and will last forever, Christ-followers must be known by their love, as Jesus was known by his love. Love is the measure of all else, in other words, the gauge by which life is evaluated. To allow η αγάπη to appraise and assess the follower of Christ means Christian love serves as the guide for all aspects of the way of life espoused here.<sup>178</sup> In order to live in the absolute supremacy of love as the guiding way of life for followers of Christ, Christians must commit themselves to the obligation of love, train themselves in the personality traits of love, and immerse themselves in the eternalness of love. This pursuit of the most excellent way of love (1 Cor. 14:1a) is the baseline for Christian witness. Internalizing the way of love transforms us to be the neighbor, following Jesus, living more fully in the realm of God, as did the Samaritan.

---

<sup>177</sup>Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1987), 640.

<sup>178</sup>This material has been reworked from the writer’s post-seminar assignment, titled “The Most Excellent Way, I Corinthians 13,” for “New Testament Greek and Exegesis for Ministry Practice,” taught by Dr. Peter Hintzoglou (Fuller Theological Seminary, summer, 2007).

### **Jesus in Conversation with a Samaritan Woman in John 4:1-42**

Three of the six stories examined in chapter 4 fall within Luke 9:51-19:44, the journey of Jesus and his disciples between Galilee and his final arrival in Jerusalem in Luke 19:28. The adventure moves Jesus and his followers through the notoriously unfriendly territory of Samaria separating Jerusalem and Galilee. It is in this same country that the next story takes place. The reader listens to another conversation; this time, Jesus talks with a woman of Samaritan descent. She was living in the Samaritan town of Sychar, near Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. A tired Jesus can be found sitting beside Jacob's well, near the field that Jacob gave to his son Joseph. In the context of traveling through Samaria and interacting with this nameless Samaritan woman, one cannot overstate the religious offence committed by Jesus when he asked her a question. The nature of Jewish and Samaritan animosity, already mentioned above, combined with the fact that a rabbi could not engage in dealings or associations with a woman, made for a shocking conversation in the ears of his disciples and of John's early readers. That the conversation was theological in nature created added tension. The dialogue initiated by Jesus can be framed as a series of five back-and-forth questions and answers that lead the woman to a transformative experience. The conversation follows.

<sup>1</sup>Now when Jesus learned that the Pharisees had heard that Jesus was making and baptizing more disciples than John <sup>2</sup>(although Jesus himself did not baptize, but only his disciples), <sup>3</sup>he left Judea and departed again for Galilee. <sup>4</sup>And he had to pass through Samaria. <sup>5</sup>So he came to a town of Samaria called Sychar, near the field that Jacob had given to his son Joseph. <sup>6</sup>Jacob's well was there; so Jesus, wearied as he was from his journey, was sitting beside the well. It was about the sixth hour

<sup>7</sup>A woman from Samaria came to draw water. Jesus said to her, "Give me a drink." <sup>8</sup>(For his disciples had gone away into the city to buy food.) <sup>9</sup>The Samaritan woman said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.) <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered her, "If you knew the gift of God, and who it is that is saying to you,

‘Give me a drink,’ you would have asked him, and he would have given you living water.” <sup>11</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, you have nothing to draw water with, and the well is deep. Where do you get that living water? <sup>12</sup>Are you greater than our father Jacob? He gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did his sons and his livestock.” <sup>13</sup>Jesus said to her, “Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, <sup>14</sup>but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again. The water that I will give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life.” <sup>15</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water.”

<sup>16</sup>Jesus said to her, “Go, call your husband, and come here.” <sup>17</sup>The woman answered him, “I have no husband.” Jesus said to her, “You are right in saying, ‘I have no husband’; <sup>18</sup>for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your husband. What you have said is true.” <sup>19</sup>The woman said to him, “Sir, I perceive that you are a prophet. <sup>20</sup>Our fathers worshiped on this mountain, but you say that in Jerusalem is the place where people ought to worship.” <sup>21</sup>Jesus said to her, “Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. <sup>22</sup>You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. <sup>23</sup>But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father is seeking such people to worship him. <sup>24</sup>God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.” <sup>25</sup>The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things.” <sup>26</sup>Jesus said to her, “I who speak to you am he.”

<sup>27</sup>Just then his disciples came back. They marveled that he was talking with a woman, but no one said, “What do you seek?” or, “Why are you talking with her?” <sup>28</sup>So the woman left her water jar and went away into town and said to the people, <sup>29</sup>“Come, see a man who told me all that I ever did. Can this be the Christ?” <sup>30</sup>They went out of the town and were coming to him.

<sup>31</sup>Meanwhile the disciples were urging him, saying, “Rabbi, eat.” <sup>32</sup>But he said to them, “I have food to eat that you do not know about.” <sup>33</sup>So the disciples said to one another, “Has anyone brought him something to eat?” <sup>34</sup>Jesus said to them, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work. <sup>35</sup>Do you not say, ‘There are yet four months, then comes the harvest’? Look, I tell you, lift up your eyes, and see that the fields are white for harvest. <sup>36</sup>Already the one who reaps is receiving wages and gathering fruit for eternal life, so that sower and reaper may rejoice together. <sup>37</sup>For here the saying holds true, ‘One sows and another reaps.’ <sup>38</sup>I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor.”

<sup>39</sup>Many Samaritans from that town believed in him because of the woman’s testimony, “He told me all that I ever did.” <sup>40</sup>So when the Samaritans came to him, they asked him to stay with them, and he stayed there two days. <sup>41</sup>And many more believed because of his word. <sup>42</sup>They said to the woman, “It is no longer because of what you said that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Savior of the world” (John 4:1-42).

The conversation included questions without question marks, a form of open-ended dialogue. The first question (John 4:7) was posed by Jesus to the approaching woman, [Can you] “give me a drink?” His stunned conversation partner, aware of her low social and religious status, answered, “How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?” Jesus, scandalously willing to engage, continued the conversation with an unexpected answer, “If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking *me* for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water” (John 4:10).<sup>179</sup> The outrageous nature of the conversation deepened as Jesus exposed her ignorance and need in light of the fact that she was in dialogue with τὴν δωρεὰν τοῦ θεοῦ, the generous gift of God.

This gift, δωρεά, is described as “the gracious gift which has already been given by God, namely, Christ (John 4:10), the Spirit (Acts 2:38; 8:20; 10:45; 11:17), or righteousness (Rom. 5:15, 17).”<sup>180</sup> Jesus pointed out that she did not yet know the nature of the gift, the “free gift with emphasis on its gratuitous character.”<sup>181</sup> Jesus introduced the centerpiece of the conversation, ζῶν ὕδωρ, living water. Living water was used exclusively in the NT by John three times in his Gospel (John 4:10, 4:11, and 7:38) and once in Revelation 7:17. At this point in their conversation, she had not asked anything of Jesus, and she did not know that he was the very source of life and of eternal life. Jesus’

---

<sup>179</sup>Quoted from *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, by Eugene H. Peterson (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002).

<sup>180</sup>H. R. Balz and G. Schneider, *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Translation of: Exegetisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 1:364.

<sup>181</sup>Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, G1431.

thirst initiated their common ground connection, while her thirst became the key to their conversation.

Her curiosity (verses 11-14) was expressed in a question regarding Jesus' ability to retrieve the water he spoke of and the deeper theological nature of who this man was, "Are you greater than our father Jacob, who gave us the well and drank from it himself, as did also his sons and his flocks and herds?" The response of Jesus wooed her toward him. "Everyone who drinks this water will be thirsty again, but those who drink the water I give them will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give them will become in them a spring of water welling up to eternal life." John's readers may have sensed a connection to this well in the sun-scorched land, and the unfailing, eternal waters prophesied by Isaiah in Isaiah 12:3 ("With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation") and in Isaiah 58:11 ("The LORD will guide you always; he will satisfy your needs in a sun-scorched land and will strengthen your frame. You will be like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail"). Later from Galilee (John 7:38), John will again refer to living water flowing out from within those who receive the Spirit through belief in Jesus Christ.

The continuing dialogue with Jesus drew her nearer to him in ways she was barely beginning to comprehend, and yet she stayed in the conversation for the ongoing series of questions and answers. Verses 15-18 exposed more vulnerability as her pain and need, along with his insight, became clear. She desired the ζῶν ὕδωρ of which he spoke, "Sir,[will you] give me this water, so that I will not be thirsty or have to come here to draw water." So much stood in her way. As the conversation deepened, Jesus asked her to call her husband, and she admitted to having no husband. Jesus knew her answer before her admission, "for you have had five husbands, and the one you now have is not your

husband. What you have said is true.” At least six unnamed men in her life appeared to the religious world of the day as further proof that this Samaritan woman was not fit for the Kingdom of God. God in her midst had quite a different spin on the story.

The longest segment of their discourse, John 4:19-24, began as the woman posed to Jesus yet another question without a question mark. “Oh, so you’re a prophet! Well, tell me this: Our ancestors worshiped God at this mountain, but you Jews insist that Jerusalem is the only place for worship, right” (John 4:18-20).<sup>182</sup> “The woman’s question about the right place to worship (v. 20) was entirely appropriate as reflecting the issue that stood at the heart of Samaritan identity and is just the kind of easily grasped popular polemic which some one of her status might have been expected to raise.”<sup>183</sup> She also may have reacted nervously to her previous intimate disclosure, or she may have responded eagerly to one who knew her dark side and yet had not rejected, condemned, or dismissed her. She also may have attempted to keep the conversation open because she wondered, ever so slightly, if she may find hope here at the well. While the Scriptures do not make apparent her motivations, the impulse of God is crystal clear.

Jesus ended this answer with the summons that God was seeking people who worship with attention to the truth of God and who are empowered by God’s own Spirit. Jesus then briefly covered a religious history familiar to the Samaritan. Jesus painted an enticing future picture of worship that would include all peoples, perhaps even an adulterous, sinful, marginalized, first-century Samaritan woman. Their theological conversation provided irresistible insight into the location of worship, the provision of

---

<sup>182</sup>Quoted from *The Message*, by Peterson.

<sup>183</sup>Green, McKnight, and Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus*, 728.



salvation for all humanity from a specific ethnic people, the nature of worship, and the one God to be worshiped. Jesus also supplied a perspective on the timing of this great future religious configuration. Jesus asserted in verse 21: *οτι ερχεται ωρα*, the future time is coming upon us. His similar assertion in verse 23: *αλλα ερχεται ωρα και νυν εστιν*, emphasized that the time is not only moving toward us, it is beginning to unfold here and now, in that present moment during which he and she were talking. The Father who seeks worshipers and the woman who seeks living water came together when the Messiah revealed himself to her as the one with whom she spoke that day at the well.

The final and shortest portion of the dialogue, verses 25-26, was the climactic ending to their conversation, but not the end of their shared experience. Her implied question (“I know that Messiah is coming, he who is called Christ. When he comes, he will tell us all things.”) can be summarized as: are you the one for whom we are waiting, the one who will give us the full story? His provocative, heretical, personal answer left her little room for doubt that she did not “have to wait any longer or look any further” (John 4:24-26).<sup>184</sup> Their conversation, completed for now, was followed by two more interactions. First, the ignorant disciples responded in verses 27-38, and then the people of Sychar responded to the woman’s story about Jesus in verses 39-42.

The nameless woman became one of the first New Testament evangelists. She engaged in a conversation with Jesus that could have changed her life forever. John’s recollection of her dialogue with *the* Savior, who might soon be *her* Savior, is our only evidence of what happened that day. After her discovery that Jesus was the man for whom she had spent her life looking, the difficult journey toward faith followed. Her

---

<sup>184</sup>Quoted from, *The Message*, by Peterson.

personal transformation was then the catalyst that had the potential to form a new community of Christ followers in Sychar.

This story demonstrates that “conversation is the very reality of evangelism.”<sup>185</sup> She later tells her simple story to the people of Sychar, a narrative focused on the man who told her everything she ever did. In the context of who he was (and is) in the universe, the encounter included a mutual conversation. Jesus, the human being, in humility and genuine need, asked her, a despised, despicable Samaritan woman, for a cup of water. Only the other side of glory will reveal the full results of the encounter. Much of the story’s outcome is as yet unknown. A few pieces of the story, however, are clear. We readers hear the story she told to her village. We feel the authentic nature of the dialogue, and we cannot help but notice his loving reaction to her.

The Samaritan message bringer experienced change in at least two ways: her story was reframed, and confidence in telling her story increased. First, the impact of how Jesus bore his own witness to her is evident in that she seemed to go back into Sychar with a renewed, remade sense of her story. John 4:1-42 discloses a message receiver quickly converted into a message bringer. She was able to tell her story with the clarity of one who had been called to something beautiful and life giving. Without harsh condemnation or shame ringing in her ears, she could speak of the compassionate, loving man who told her everything she ever did. Her soul expanded to be able to see Jesus Christ for who he was and to be known, loved, and accepted in spite of her past. The sudden presence of Jesus Christ in her everyday, ordinary life, his unabashed public appointment with her at the well, and his shameless willingness to identify with her in her

---

<sup>185</sup>Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 95.

current sinful state, offer a framework for twenty-first century evangelism in the UCC.

He respected her. He dialogued with her, remaining open to her questions. Perhaps Jesus Christ, the story-teller, had more effect than the story he told.

Second she experienced a change of confidence in telling the story. Jesus empowered her to go back into her community and tell her new story. So powerful was her witness about Jesus that it became the initial foundation for the community's discovery and belief in the Savior of the world. The outcome of the message she brought was that many Samaritans believed he was the Savior of the world (John 4:39-42). Due to her story and to the actual presence and words of Christ in their midst, the community of Sychar was transformed. She was the unexpected witness: a woman, a Samaritan, a sinner, not of the religious elite, not one of the rag tag group of new Jesus followers. Allowing him to speak into deep places of her soul, she then did what came most naturally: she told her reframed story with courage and confidence.

In light of fact that we the readers lack knowledge about her story's ending, there are limitations inherent in understanding this encounter. It is likely that the limits the Holy Spirit placed on our knowledge are important factors in how we integrate the story into our lives. Did she recognize her sin? Did she repent? Was she converted? Could she have been an evangelist without a full conversion to Christ? What we cannot yet know is as important to the story as what we do know. Her attempts to share with others what she encountered in the presence of Jesus Christ is certain. That she goes down in history as one of the first evangelists is evidence of the transformative power of the gospel and of the original message bringer, as well as the change in her soul. Her once fragmented life moved toward re-orientation and transformation.

This Samaritan at the well presents an occasion different from the parabolic story of the heroic, merciful Samaritan because the woman was a real life person present in the life of Jesus. She was a religious, social, political outsider in conversation with the Messiah. The next two stories involve people in the circle of human relationships connected to Jesus Christ and fall in the category of physical healings. The framing of a theological lens for Christian witness continues with the narratives of Jesus healing Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52 and Jesus receiving the Samaritan Leper in Luke 17:11-19.

### **Jesus Heals Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52**

<sup>46</sup>And they came to Jericho. And as he was leaving Jericho with his disciples and a great crowd, Bartimaeus, a blind beggar, the son of Timaeus, was sitting by the roadside. <sup>47</sup>And when he heard that it was Jesus of Nazareth, he began to cry out and say, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me!” <sup>48</sup>And many rebuked him, telling him to be silent. But he cried out all the more, “Son of David, have mercy on me!” <sup>49</sup>And Jesus stopped and said, “Call him.” And they called the blind man, saying to him, “Take heart. Get up; he is calling you.” <sup>50</sup>And throwing off his cloak, he sprang up and came to Jesus. <sup>51</sup>And Jesus said to him, “What do you want me to do for you?” And the blind man said to him, “Rabbi, let me recover my sight.” <sup>52</sup>And Jesus said to him, “Go your way; your faith has made you well.” And immediately he recovered his sight and followed him on the way (Mark 10:46-52).

The third story introduces healing encounters as a layer of the foundation for a new paradigm of Christian witness. The healing that took place for Bartimaeus in Mark 10:46-52 widens the theological lens enabling UCC lay people to discover fresh, biblical, culturally appropriate evangelism practices. The blind man recognized Jesus first and then joined the tribe of the soon-to-be community of the risen Christ. Bartimaeus, in spite of the rebuking crowd, begged Jesus Christ for mercy twice in the story. Shouting at Jesus using the name Son of David revealed Bartimaeus’ faith and elicited affirmation from Jesus. This faith catalyzed the healing he desired. His eager response to a dialogue

with Jesus (He jumped up to his feet and enthusiastically came toward Jesus!) was the first of a series of steps of faith. Healing began when Jesus asked him what he wanted.

Immediately after receiving his sight Bartimeaus followed Jesus and connected himself to the loose knit community of Christ-followers. The phrase “on the way,” *εν τη οδω* at the end of verse 52, provides not only a beginning outline for following Jesus Christ, but it also summarizes the transformative nature of their conversation. Jesus, the master of sincere listening, engaged with a fellow human being’s story, invited a response of faith, and welcomed him.

The encounter between Jesus and Bartimaeus revealed much about the nature of evangelism demonstrated by Jesus and the specific impact of witnessing on the message receiver’s soul. Bartimaeus, the message receiver, initiated the dialogue with a cry for mercy. Jesus, the message bringer, positioned himself to respond to the man’s request. The message brought by Jesus unfolded as a three-part encounter. First, Jesus responded by attentively listening to the blind beggar. Next he healed Bartimaeus, and third, Jesus declared an affirmation of the man’s faith. The message was simple. Similar to the account of the woman at the well, the content centers on the person of Jesus Christ, not information about Jesus. The message receiver’s body and soul were transformed by the healing presence of Jesus. This transformation led to an immediate and potentially life-long response of discipleship on the part of Bartimaeus.

Comparable, though not identical, stories are recorded in Luke 18:35-43, Matthew 9:27-31 and John 9:1-41. Matthew’s story occurred before the transfiguration and included two blind men who responded by going out to spread the news about Jesus all over the region. Jesus affirmed their faith, connecting it to their healing. Luke’s account,

like Mark's, came after the transfiguration. The man immediately received his sight and followed Jesus. John wrote that, after the healing, which included a rigorous investigation by the Pharisees, the man declared, "Lord I believe," and then he worshiped Jesus.

Mark records that Bartimaeus received his sight and "followed Jesus along the road," ἐν τῇ ὁδῷ. Richard Peace notes that Mark "used verbs of motions more frequently than any of the other evangelists."<sup>186</sup> Although the twelve are also on the way, in Mark's account they have not yet become the kind of disciples Jesus intends them to be. "They have yet to understand about his death and resurrection,"<sup>187</sup> in part because Jesus had not yet given his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45). The disciples heard Jesus talk about his sacrificial ransom, but they had not yet fully believed him. The once blind message receiver(s) in the story had a soul-transforming encounter with Jesus that resulted in a combination of belief, worship, following after Jesus, and bearing witness to the power and authority of Jesus Christ. Bartimaeus, along with the twelve, were in the process of conversion. Jesus did not use attentive listening as an opportunity to preach, convict, or shame a person(s) into conversion. Rather, he genuinely met them where they were and made himself fully present in that moment. His presence affected their souls, which is evidenced in the subsequent discipleship behaviors.

Bartimaeus shifted the newfound sight lines of his life toward Jesus. He followed after Jesus with energetic, lively faith, even though he was not yet a disciple in the fullest sense. Bartimaeus, by the simple act of following, joined the quickly growing community of women and men who were walking with Jesus. In this story Jesus "makes it clear that

---

<sup>186</sup>Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 268-269.

<sup>187</sup>Ibid.

he himself is the focus of discipleship, and that there is a connection between him and the Gospel...the object of Bartimaeus' faith is identified...it is Jesus."<sup>188</sup> Understanding more fully who Jesus Christ was and what the cross meant was a week away for the disciples and perhaps for Bartimaeus as well. Confessing their faith had begun, but was not yet full with the confidence that Jesus wanted for them and for us. Their conversions had begun, but more awaited them at the cross and beyond.

Conversion begins with insight. When people are confronted with the reality of their situation before God, the option is presented to them to correct their errant ways. They now see, and in seeing it becomes possible for them to say no to the old way while embracing a new way. Without such insight into their true states before God, there would be no reason to embrace a new way. Without insight there can be no conversion.<sup>189</sup>

### **Jesus Receives the Samaritan Leper in Luke 17:11-19**

<sup>11</sup>On the way to Jerusalem he was passing along between Samaria and Galilee. <sup>12</sup>And as he entered a village, he was met by ten lepers, who stood at a distance <sup>13</sup>and lifted up their voices, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us." <sup>14</sup>When he saw them he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went they were cleansed. <sup>15</sup>Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice; <sup>16</sup>and he fell on his face at Jesus' feet, giving him thanks. Now he was a Samaritan. <sup>17</sup>Then Jesus answered, "Were not ten cleansed? Where are the nine?" <sup>18</sup>Was no one found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" <sup>19</sup>And he said to him, "Rise and go your way; your faith has made you well" (Luke 17:11-19).

The fourth story involves another dishonorable, though less famous Samaritan. In spite of Samaritan opposition at the beginning of Luke's travel narrative (Luke 9:51-55), Jesus embraced Samaritans along the journey. His welcome inclusion of this despised race of people provides a useful pattern for twenty-first-century Christian witness. The

---

<sup>188</sup>Peace, *Conversion in the New Testament*, 265-266.

<sup>189</sup>*Ibid.*, 49-50.

story of the thankful Samaritan leper received by Jesus provides specific modeling based on how Jesus witnessed to those acutely outside the culture of the emerging Christian faith of his day. The story is studied by elucidating six key phrases or words.

The first key phrase, δέκα λεπροὶ ἄνδρες in 17:12, described ten scaly or scabby men who stood at a distance as Jesus entered a village between Samaria and Galilee. These ten men were portrayed as having one or more of a variety of skin ailments and “whether these are always (or ever) the same as what we call leprosy is debated.”<sup>190</sup> The plural, nominative adjective λεπροὶ is linked to Leviticus 13:2–14:32, where specific laws governing the behaviors of lepers are outlined. For example, lepers are categorized as outsiders who must live segregated from the rest of the community. Jesus violated societal norms and the Levitical code in order to heal these human exiles, both Jewish and Samaritan.

Leprosy was an unattractive skin disease (not limited to what is called leprosy today) for which the Bible had prescribed quarantine from the rest of society (Lev. 13:45–46), although the Bible did not go so far as many Jewish teachers in blaming the disease on the leper’s sin. Lepers were thus outcasts from the rest of society, the kind of people most healthy people preferred to ignore.<sup>191</sup>

The second key word, ἐλεῶ (mercy) in Luke 17:13, elaborated on the length to which Jesus went to extend himself, his love, and his power to the quarantined ones who asked for his help. The aorist, active, imperative, verb, ἐλέησον means to show mercy, to show compassion. The simple “general meaning is to have compassion or mercy on a

---

<sup>190</sup>Kittel, Friedrich, and Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, 529.

<sup>191</sup>C. S. Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), Luke 17:11-12.



person in unhappy circumstances.”<sup>192</sup> Jesus extended the kindness of healing to the ten ostracized lepers and ἐλεάω came to them quickly from Jesus in verse 14. Not only did Jesus heal them, but his response was also an indicator of his compassion and mercy.

During another incident with a leper recorded earlier in Luke 5:12-14 (and Matt. 8:4), Jesus had been asked not for mercy, but to make the man clean if he was willing. This story proceeded as Jesus admitted his willingness to heal and cleanse, and commanded that the man be clean. Jesus touched the despised foreign leper. The leprosy immediately left the man as Jesus then followed the Levitical code requiring that healed leper to “go and show yourself to the priest, and make an offering for your cleansing, as Moses commanded, for a proof to them” (Luke 5:14).

In Luke 17, Jesus made the same requirement of the ten lepers. Strangely different from the earlier healing, the ten were healed on their way to the priests. The third key word (Luke 17:14), ἐκαθαρίσθησαν, means the ten were cleansed. “The Bible had prescribed particular sacrifices if someone’s leprosy were cured (Lev. 14:1–32). By complying with these regulations, Jesus does nothing to violate the law or to offend the priests.”<sup>193</sup> It is customary that a command to visit the priest would follow a healing act (Lev. 13:49; 14:2-3.), “so that the cured man might officially resume his place in society. Here the use of the plural ἱερεῖς (priests) arises from the fact that a mixed group of lepers, Jewish and Samaritan is described, and each man would go to the appropriate priest....

---

<sup>192</sup>Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary*, G1653.

<sup>193</sup>Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, Luke 17:14.

The command to go to the priests is a test of faith and obedience.”<sup>194</sup> In this incident, whether or not he touched the men, a clear violation of the law, is unknown to the reader.

It is significant that on the way to his crucifixion, Jesus paused for a healing interaction with another unclean Samaritan outsider. The one who came to redeem the whole world suspended the journey on behalf of one sick, alienated human being. Of the ten, the Samaritan leper was the only one to return and give thanks.

This Samaritan, like other Samaritans, was considered by Jewish people to be “irreligious and religious Jews avoided intimate dealings with them. This tension supplies most of the punch of the story. That a Samaritan would travel with Jewish lepers in the area between Samaria and Galilee (v. 11) also illustrates the extremity of lepers’ outcast status: it erases other social distinctions.”<sup>195</sup> In verse 15, one leper turned back, πρόσωπον, the fourth key word. He responded to the knowledge that he had been healed and connected the cleansing to Jesus as he turned back to Jesus praising God with a loud voice. The hostility between Jews and Samaritans during the first century was not present between Jesus and this thankful leper. In fact, the healed man returned in faith and in worship as he fell on his face at the feet of Jesus offering thanks.

The fifth key word, found in verse 16 and helpful for a more full understanding of the thankful Samaritan leper’s encounter with Jesus, is εὐχαριστῶν, giving thanks, thanks rendered to God.

Only here in all the NT are such thanks directed to Jesus. Elsewhere they are directed to God (18:11; 22:17, 19; Acts 27:35; 28:15). Luke made clear in Acts

---

<sup>194</sup>I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1978), 651.

<sup>195</sup>Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary*, Luke 17:15.

10:25–26 that such homage does not belong to humans, only to God (cf. also Acts 12:21–23). Yet such homage is also to be directed to Jesus. Thus Luke demonstrated once again Jesus’ uniqueness.<sup>196</sup>

To dramatize the story further, Luke waits past the mid point of the story to declare that the Samaritan alone gave thanks to Jesus. Only this stranger, this foreigner, this non-Israelite, ο αλλογενής (17:18) came back to give praise to God.

The sixth and final key word found in the phrase, πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε, means your faith has saved or cured you. “The clause refers to his faith in Jesus’ implied promise of healing (v. 14) and its fulfillment.”<sup>197</sup> The phrase would have been familiar to Luke’s readers (7:50 and 8:48). Faith had been the means of the cure and of the Samaritan leper’s salvation. In spite of the fact that some commentators regard the clause as a redactional addition, it is

an integral part of the story, since the whole point of the second part of the story lies in the relationship of the man to Jesus, and not simply in the fact that he gives thanks. The story does not necessarily imply that the other nine lacked faith; the point is rather that their faith was incomplete because it did not issue in gratitude.<sup>198</sup>

The story and the conversation support the Lukan theme of “the great reversal”<sup>199</sup> in that the outcast, in this case a Samaritan leper, truly believed and was welcomed, included, and affirmed by Jesus and later by the believing Christian community in Acts 1:8; 8:1, 4–25; 9:31; 15:3. Radical inclusion in the form of healing mercy, characteristic

---

<sup>196</sup>R. H. Stein, *Luke, The New American Commentary*, vol. 24 of Logos Library System electronic ed. (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001), 434.

<sup>197</sup>J. Reiling, and J. L. Swellengrebel, *A Handbook on the Gospel of Luke* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1993), 585. Originally published as *A Translator’s Handbook on the Gospel of Luke*, UBS Handbook Series: Helps for Translator (New York: United Bible Societies, 1971).

<sup>198</sup>Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, 652.

<sup>199</sup>Stein, *Luke*, 435.

of the life of Jesus Christ and of the intentions of the UCC, contributes to the forming foundation for rediscovering a better approach to Christian witness.

### **Jesus in Relationship with Zacchaeus in Luke 19:1-10**

As Jesus and the disciples traveled toward Jerusalem, Jericho (Luke 18:35 and Matt. 20:29) was their final stopping point before the triumphal entry. The beginning of Jesus' relationship with Zacchaeus occurred near the time of Bartimaeus' healing (Mark 10:46). As Jerusalem drew near, the tax collector was among those wishing to see Jesus (for example, see also John 12:21). His career elicited scorn and opposition similar to "prostitutes (Mt 21:31-32), and ... sinners (Mk 2:15; Lk 15:1). This attitude was universal: the rabbis joined tax collectors with robbers, and Roman writers joined them with brothel keepers."<sup>200</sup> As a chief tax collector, Zacchaeus most likely supervised other tax collectors and, in his business dealings, would have leaned toward fraud, abuse, institutional robbery, and dishonesty. Luke 19: 1-10 is a powerful example for discerning the way of life characterized by Jesus and provides fruitful practices for twenty-first century evangelism. The story follows.

<sup>1</sup>He entered Jericho and was passing through. <sup>2</sup>And there was a man named Zacchaeus. He was a chief tax collector and was rich. <sup>3</sup>And he was seeking to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was small of stature. <sup>4</sup>So he ran on ahead and climbed up into a sycamore tree to see him, for he was about to pass that way. <sup>5</sup>And when Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, hurry and come down, for I must stay at your house today." <sup>6</sup>So he hurried and came down and received him joyfully. <sup>7</sup>And when they saw it, they all grumbled, "He has gone in to be the guest of a man who is a sinner." <sup>8</sup>And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, "Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor. And if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold." <sup>9</sup>And Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has

---

<sup>200</sup>Green, McKnight, and Marshall, *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 806.

come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham. <sup>10</sup>For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost” (Luke 19:1-10).

The brief time Zacchaeus spent with Jesus changed his life and initiated a lasting relationship between them. What a startling contrast it was to the conversation Jesus had with another wealthy man. “Sell all that you have and distribute it to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me.” This rich man, walked away from Jesus, a decision that saddened both of them. Zacchaeus responded to Jesus in a completely opposite fashion (Luke 18:18-25). Zacchaeus, also affluent (Luke 19:2), knew he was a sinner. When Jesus called on him, he was eager to be welcomed into the Kingdom and declared that he would give half of what he possessed to the poor. He also determined that, to those from whom he had extorted, he would restore four times what he had stolen.

Zacchaeus ecstatically welcomed Jesus, and his joy overflowed into radical response. The Pharisees, scribes, and other religious leaders complained about the fact that Jesus welcomed sinners and was welcomed by sinners. They felt offended (Luke 15:2) and “grumbled, saying, this man receives sinners and eats with them.” They were astounded as Jesus called this tax collector a son of Abraham in verse 10, affirming his faith as one who walked (Rom. 4:12) “in the footsteps of the faith that our father Abraham had before he was circumcised.” Jesus saw the faith of Zacchaeus as sharing in the faith of Abraham (Rom. 4:16), “who is the father of all of us.” Paul later would supply further clarification about what transpired for Zacchaeus when Jesus affirmed him as a son of Abraham. “Know then that it is those of faith who are the sons of Abraham. And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the

gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, 'In you shall all the nations be blessed.' So then, those who are of faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith" (Gal. 3:7-9).

Jesus invited himself to dinner at the home of this notorious sinner, known in the community as an extortionist, liar, and legal thief. Jesus extended friendship to him prior to evidence of conversion, prior to any exchange of gospel content, and prior to any verbal admission of guilt, need, or longing. Relationship was Jesus' goal, not the means to an evangelistic encounter. Zacchaeus was being transformed. The response of generosity that flowed out of Zacchaeus had its source in the dinner guest. The presence of the guest converted, or at least began the process of conversion, in the host's heart, mind, soul, and money.

The love that overcame Zacchaeus was not a sentimental, domesticated kind of affection. It was rather, an expression of love that gives us a hint at the Jesus way of life. Zacchaeus learned quickly, perhaps immediately, how to love God and love his neighbors as an expression of loving Jesus. His new life impacted Jericho in dramatic ways as the community felt the ripple effects of the presence of Jesus Christ in the life of Zacchaeus. The time they shared was a turning point that served the development of Zacchaeus' soul and the communal soul of Jericho.

In the midst of those who disapproved, Jesus initiated relationship by stepping toward another sinner's dinner table. Following Zacchaeus' reaction to Jesus, Jesus declared that he, the Son of Man, came to seek and to save the lost. Poor people were given new hope because of Jesus and the generosity of the transforming tax collector. Innocent people who had been cheated experienced restoration. The community witnessed one of their own, a despised, lost one, brought back to the God of Abraham.

The life-altering love of Jesus Christ radically catalyzed change and opened new avenues of faith in Jericho.

Of most interest to the work of evangelism is verse 10 *ἦλθεν γὰρ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου ζητησαὶ καὶ σῶσαι τὸ ἀπολωλός* (For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost). The two aorist, active, infinitive verbs (verbal nouns) describe the mission of the Christ as seeking and saving that which already has been ruined, destroyed, and lost. The redemptive purpose is crucial to the story and the relationship. This encounter is more about the redeeming one than the one being redeemed. The redeemed one's actions are simply evidence of the redemption taking place, unlike the other rich man who still lacked one thing. Zacchaeus' responses were not the fulfillment of prerequisites; rather, they served as confirmation of a life being restored.

Additionally, in Luke 15:4, the seeking God is illustrated through the parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, and the lost one. In Matthew 9:9-13, Jesus responded to the critical religious leaders by declaring that those who are well do not have need of a doctor. He challenged them to go and learn what it means that God desires mercy and not sacrifices. Jesus told them he came not to call those who are already righteous, but those who are sinners.

The God who searches after all people is seen most clearly in Jesus Christ, but we also witness God as the seeking one in the Old Testament. In Ezekiel 34:11-16, for example, God is described as searching, seeking, rescuing, gathering, restoring, recovering, healing, and bring salvation to the lost.

<sup>11</sup>For thus says the Lord GOD: Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep and will seek them out. <sup>12</sup>As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his sheep that have been scattered, so will I seek out my sheep, and I will rescue them from all places where they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick

darkness. <sup>13</sup> And I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land. And I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the ravines, and in all the inhabited places of the country. <sup>14</sup> I will feed them with good pasture, and on the mountain heights of Israel shall be their grazing land. There they shall lie down in good grazing land, and on rich pasture they shall feed on the mountains of Israel. <sup>15</sup> I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I myself will make them lie down, declares the Lord GOD. <sup>16</sup> I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, and the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them in justice.

Luke's recollection of Zacchaeus exemplifies a relationship more about Jesus as the seeker than Zacchaeus as the seeker. In seeking the lost, the Son of Man went to their homes, their wells, and their table in order to extend himself (the gospel) to all who might one day respond and eventually worship God. Zacchaeus' encounter with Christ displayed the nature of witness as presence in a growing relationship. More importantly, a theological foundation for Christian witness in the UCC is laid in the nature of the Creator God who intentionally seeks what is lost.

### **Jesus in Relationship with Nicodemus in John 3:1-21, 7:40-52, and 19:38-42**

The sixth and final story creating the theological lens through which Sixth Avenue UCC can rediscover a useful paradigm for evangelism involves the developing relationship between Nicodemus and Jesus. The fragments about Nicodemus found in John's Gospel span the better part of John's testimony about Jesus Christ. John admits that the book could not possibly contain all the signs Jesus did in the presence of his disciples (John 20:30), that "there are also many other things that Jesus did" (John 21:25). John also laments (John 21:25) that if everything about Jesus' life were recorded, "the world itself could not contain the books that would be written." Evidence of Nicodemus' relationship is seen scattered throughout the book of John.



Unlike the main characters in the other five stories explored, Nicodemus, a prominent Pharisee, was introduced in John 3 and re-entered the story of Jesus in two additional segments of John. In John 7:50, he questioned his fellow Pharisees about the way they were prematurely condemning Jesus. Nicodemus' thoughtful questioning occurred within the dark cloud of the disgruntled mob, characterized by increasing disagreement about who Jesus was. Later in the story, Nicodemus assisted Joseph of Arimathea with the performance of the Jewish burial customs (19:38-42) for the dead body of Jesus. He supplied the seventy-five-pound mixture of spices for wrapping Jesus' body. That dark Friday, he and Joseph were the last human beings to touch the human body of Jesus Christ.

The developing relationship of Nicodemus and Jesus began early in John's account as a mutual conversation. Nicodemus chose the late hour for their initial dialogue, which led eventually to further curiosity, concern, and then compassion as he respectfully removed the lifeless body of the Savior from the cross. John's account of the relationship that was forged between Jesus and Nicodemus follows from the *English Standard Version*. Admittedly, John 3:16-21 is disputed in terms of whether these are the words of Jesus or John's insertion. This and other interpretive questions will not be addressed because primary attention is given to the unfolding life experience of Nicodemus in relationship to Jesus Christ and less to the details of the conversation.

#### John 3:1-21

<sup>1</sup>Now there was a man of the Pharisees named Nicodemus, a ruler of the Jews.  
<sup>2</sup>This man came to Jesus by night and said to him, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher come from God, for no one can do these signs that you do unless God is with him."  
<sup>3</sup>Jesus answered him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God."  
<sup>4</sup>Nicodemus said to him, "How can a

man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" <sup>5</sup>Jesus answered, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. <sup>6</sup>That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup>Do not marvel that I said to you, 'You must be born again.' <sup>8</sup>The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit."

<sup>9</sup>Nicodemus said to him, "How can these things be?" <sup>10</sup>Jesus answered him, "Are you the teacher of Israel and yet you do not understand these things?"

<sup>11</sup>Truly, truly, I say to you, we speak of what we know, and bear witness to what we have seen, but you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup>If I have told you earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you heavenly things?"

<sup>13</sup>No one has ascended into heaven except he who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup>And as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup>that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup>"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. <sup>17</sup>For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup>Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup>And this is the judgment: the light has come into the world, and people loved the darkness rather than the light because their works were evil. <sup>20</sup>For everyone who does wicked things hates the light and does not come to the light, lest his works should be exposed. <sup>21</sup>But whoever does what is true comes to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that his works have been carried out in God."

#### John 7:40-52

<sup>40</sup>When they heard these words, some of the people said, "This really is the Prophet." <sup>41</sup>Others said, "This is the Christ." But some said, "Is the Christ to come from Galilee? <sup>42</sup>Has not the Scripture said that the Christ comes from the offspring of David, and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David was?"

<sup>43</sup>So there was a division among the people over him. <sup>44</sup>Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

<sup>45</sup>The officers then came to the chief priests and Pharisees, who said to them, "Why did you not bring him?" <sup>46</sup>The officers answered, "No one ever spoke like this man!" <sup>47</sup>The Pharisees answered them, "Have you also been deceived?"

<sup>48</sup>Have any of the authorities or the Pharisees believed in him? <sup>49</sup>But this crowd that does not know the law is accursed." <sup>50</sup>Nicodemus, who had gone to him before, and who was one of them, said to them, <sup>51</sup>"Does our law judge a man without first giving him a hearing and learning what he does?" <sup>52</sup>They replied, "Are you from Galilee too? Search and see that no prophet arises from Galilee."

## John 19:38-42

<sup>38</sup>After these things Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, but secretly for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus, and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took away his body.

<sup>39</sup>Nicodemus also, who earlier had come to Jesus by night, came bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds in weight. <sup>40</sup>So they took the body of Jesus and bound it in linen cloths with the spices, as is the burial custom of the Jews. <sup>41</sup>Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden, and in the garden a new tomb in which no one had yet been laid. <sup>42</sup>So because of the Jewish day of Preparation, since the tomb was close at hand, they laid Jesus there.

Nicodemus experienced Jesus as available (to meet with him at night), responsive (in addressing his desire and need to know God), caring (demonstrated by his patience in the discussion with Nicodemus), and listening in an attentive, empathic manner. The unfolding story of Nicodemus spread throughout John's gospel bears witness to a life in the process of transformation and to the personal involvement of Jesus in the story of the one being transformed. Their first connection created for Nicodemus a role as participating witness in the unfolding drama of the gospel. Not enough information is available to draw specific conclusions about his conversion or his wider witness to the person of Jesus Christ. We can, however, assume with some accuracy that Nicodemus' experiences in John 3, 7, and 19 placed him in the category of gospel story-listener and story-teller. Nicodemus was a person with a distinct, personal relationship with Jesus. Brueggemann might recall Nicodemus as evidence that "God lives on the lips of story-tellers,"<sup>201</sup> as well as in the hearts of story-listeners.

The relational impact on Nicodemus' life displays an attachment forged by the developing connection between them. Much like Joseph of Arimathea, who was intimidated by the Jews, Nicodemus moved about in secrecy, and yet he moved

---

<sup>201</sup>Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 112.

cautiously toward the message bringer and The Message. The relationship emerged, even though Nicodemus remained apparently uninvolved until the end of John's Gospel. The parallels between Nicodemus' life and that of Joseph of Arimathea and others who share a reluctant curiosity about Jesus Christ are plentiful in human history.

Almost a millennium and a half later, the art of Michelangelo provides a clue into the likelihood of the increasing attachment between Nicodemus and Jesus and allows us to see the potential in the souls of all human beings to be in relationship with God. Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1475-1564) may have been the most accomplished sculptor in the history of art. He led the way in the Italian High Renaissance, and his powerful influence over western art remains today. The unfinished, broken *Pietà* pictured below (1547–1555) was sculpted well into the second half of the artist's life, after his conversion. Most of his life, Michelangelo rejected Christ. His late-in-life conversion is expressed beautifully in this unfinished, magnificent work of art. His intimate identification with Jesus through the character of Nicodemus points to the possibility of an authentic attachment to the risen Christ. While visiting this late rendition of the *Pietà* in The Museum of the Opera del Duomo in Florence, Italy, I was moved to tears by the face of Michelangelo embodied in Nicodemus. I could not take my eyes off the affection connecting him to Jesus.

The *Pietà* was meant for Michelangelo's own tomb, but legend has it that in a fit of frustration (he claimed that the marble was unsuitable), Michelangelo attempted to destroy the work and was stopped by his pupils. The theme of this *Pietà* is much changed from Michelangelo's earlier version, for this work focuses on the relentless force of death that draws Christ down with a will that the human figures are powerless to resist. The three figures present are Mary Magdalene, Joseph of Arimathea (often also identified as Nicodemus), and the Virgin. As a group, the figures are so compelling that most visitors do not notice that Christ is missing a leg. Michelangelo chose the figure of the older man, (Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea), in which to depict his own features, but this calm,

compassionate portrayal is far removed from his violent and anguished self-portrait in *Last Judgment*. The head of Christ, in contrast to that of the 1498-1499 *Pietà*, is cradled not by the Virgin but by Michelangelo's own incarnation of himself. Michelangelo is careful to focus (Nicodemus' or Joseph's) energies on the strength and tenderness with which the Savior should be treated in death.<sup>202</sup>



This *Pietà* by Michelangelo, 7 feet 8 inches tall, stands in the *The Museum of the Opera del Duomo* in Florence, Italy.<sup>203</sup>

Jesus generously provided ample space for the forging of Nicodemus' attachment to and trust in God, establishing for all time a pattern for how human message bringers move in the world. Jesus had no expectation that a step-by-step process would occur for those who encountered him. For Nicodemus, and perhaps Michelangelo, attachment developed first at a cerebral level and included criticism, curiosity, and intellectual interest. Nicodemus moved toward tentative involvement when he differed with his contemporaries on the way the crisis forming around Jesus was being handled. Later, his

---

<sup>202</sup>Dr. Ronald Goetz, a Century editor at large, holds the Niebuhr distinguished chair of theology and ethics at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois. This article appeared in the *Christian Century* (March 21-28, 1984): 299. Copyright by the Christian Century Foundation and used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at [www.christiancentury.org](http://www.christiancentury.org). This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

<sup>203</sup>Photographs taken from "Michelangelo Sculptures," by Lauren Mitchell Ruehring, <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/michelangelo-sculptures21.htm> (accessed November 23, 2009).

attachment progressed into a change of heart, evidenced by his compassionate and sacrificial service with Joseph of Arimathea. The Bible affirms unfinished conversion, a change process that makes its way in its own time toward transformation. Little to no concrete verification exists to substantiate Nicodemus' or Michalangelo's conversion, yet, our experience of them in art and in biblical story opens the door to a new conversation about conversion, transformation, and evangelism.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude chapter 4, biblical reflection on the stories of Jesus and the ways he interacted with people points to the importance of a Christ-centered foundation for the practice of evangelism. Attentive Christians discover in Jesus Christ not only the message of the gospel fully embodied, but also the necessary pattern for how to deliver the message clearly, accurately, and lovingly. Stories from the life of Christ offer transformational instruction for sharing in the realm of God. Certainly Jesus cannot be understood exclusively as an evangelist for that view would be an incomplete picture of the authentic Jesus. Nevertheless, among his many roles, Jesus Christ is the consummate message bringer. From his stories, the following ten conclusions are to be considered later for application at Sixth Avenue UCC.

First, Jesus the witness, the evangelist, the bringer of good news in word and deed, engaged in on-going dialogue with people. Second, Jesus was guided by the absolute supremacy of love. Third, those who received the message of the gospel from him quickly became message bringers to those around them. Fourth, Jesus identified wholeheartedly, shamelessly, respectfully with all persons. Fifth, Jesus engaged in story telling and story listening. It must be noted that how a story is understood informs how it

is told, and how a story is told, in turn, impacts how it is heard. Sixth, Jesus desired for people to experience conversion. In other words, authentic human transformation was his goal. Seventh, while conversion was his desire, redemptive relationship in each encounter was also his desire. Jesus Christ held this holy paradox in creative tension. Eighth, the manner in which Jesus had relationships with people was marked by radical, unconditional, inclusive welcome of all. Ninth, Jesus was a seeker, intentionally pursuing people with the loving, hopeful wish to be known and to know. Tenth, Jesus allowed for the process of attachment in relationship to him to take on a large variety of forms as people were frequently in the process of spiritual discovery.

The stories of Jesus provide the leading paradigm for Christian witness. These stories, carefully examined from the life of Christ, offer direction for a proposal on behalf of Sixth Avenue's preparation to expand congregational outreach and witnessing efforts in Denver, Colorado. Equipped with insights from the ministry of Jesus and modeling based on how he interacted with people who were not yet, or who were just beginning to follow him, inform a new approach to evangelism specifically designed for the United Church of Christ in chapter 5.

## CHAPTER 5

### A THEOLOGY OF EVANGELISM MINISTRY

In chapter 5, Part Two culminates by respectfully suggesting a theology of ministry for Sixth Avenue UCC in order to enliven the evangelism efforts of the congregation. Integrating the discoveries of Part One, the central themes from the literature review of chapter 3, and the theological reflections of chapter 4, the following proposal for a theology of ministry focuses on casting vision for evangelism. Also addressed are general ministry practices for empowering lay Christian witness, key elements of which are the role of the pastor as equipper, disciple maker, and evangelist, along with the role of the laity as disciples and witnesses.

#### **Re-imagining Evangelism**

The theology of evangelism ministry presented here is a simple paradigm with a far-reaching goal accomplishable only by God: that the Holy Spirit would transform people's relationships with God, with other human beings, and with the earth. The structure for this approach is shaped by practicing honest reflection, genuine discovery, intentional disclosure, and loving service. This theology of ministry emerges out of a new way of seeing, a framework for understanding the Christian life that forms new attitudes, perspectives, beliefs, and habits: a re-imagining of what it means to follow Jesus. Albert



Einstein thought imagination more important than knowledge, and, in the formation of a theology of ministry related to evangelism in the UCC, this may indeed be the case.

If everyday followers of Christ came to see their relationships with God, others, and the earth differently, amazing opportunities for Christian witness through the local church could be launched. The paradigm shift, like a light switch flipped on, would diminish fears because this way of seeing would be natural already to the lives of lay persons in the UCC. Simple enough, the approach to evangelism is also powerful enough to inform relational complexities. The vision being cast offers possibilities for reproducing the relational patterns observed in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ and therefore clearing away some of the murkiness of evangelism inherent in the UCC. Chapter 5 moves into a re-imagining of evangelism as “godbearing.”<sup>204</sup>

The basis of a theology of evangelism ministry for Sixth Avenue begins with lay people who naturally hold God in more parts of their stories and who have confident faith that God continually initiates relationship with human beings. It is not difficult to imagine that life would be better if human beings had relationships with God where God lovingly inhabited more and more of the content of our stories. A vision for overlapping, integrated connections between the faith stories of church lay people, the stories of God, and the stories of those not-yet living the with-God life sets the direction for evangelism ministry. The gospel message points to “the fullness of humanity – love of God, love of neighbor, love of the created world for which we are to exercise careful stewardship, and

---

<sup>204</sup>Elaine A. Robinson, *Godbearing: Evangelism Reconceived* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006), 75.

love for one's self that is neither selfish nor selfless."<sup>205</sup> Evangelism, here, is designed to equip a way of life that is natural and intentional in the way Sixth Avenue UCC members build relationships. Since real change of eternal value can only be accomplished by the activity and power of the Holy Spirit, the primary prerequisite for this approach to evangelism is abiding in Christ.

### **The Anchor: Abiding in Christ**

Abiding in Christ anchors the ministry in safe theological waters. As the precondition for evangelism, abiding in Christ enables Sixth Avenue UCC to enact evangelism as an overflow of a way of life. Evangelism fueled and informed by the mysteries and spiritual practices of abiding in Christ (outlined in chapter 6, "Strategies for Empowering Lay Christian Witness") introduces the theology of ministry offered to Sixth Avenue UCC. This approach to evangelism ministry holds many potential correctives to unhealthy distortions of Christian witness so feared by the woman and men of the UCC. Abiding in Christ is defined through the words of Jesus in John 15:1-11.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup>Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>*Abide* in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it *abides* in the vine, neither can you, unless you *abide* in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever *abides* in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>If anyone does not *abide* in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you *abide* in me, and my words *abide* in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. <sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. *Abide* in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will *abide* in my love, just as I have kept my Father's

---

<sup>205</sup>Robinson, *Godbearing*, 65.

commandments and *abide* in his love. <sup>11</sup>These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that our joy may be full.

To abide is to remain with Jesus, to endure and to live so closely with God in Christ that the life of Jesus provides the nourishment necessary to thrive in the world. Seen as story connections, abiding is the ongoing overlap between a person's story and God's story. God pursues relationship with human beings; God wants intimate connection with us, and we respond to God's initiation. If we are not near Christ in our daily lives, we will not be able to bear lasting, Kingdom fruit. Jesus invites us to abide and models this important dynamic in our lives as his followers, our abiding relationship with God.

John's understanding of abiding in Christ, particularly from John 15 and 1 John, implies living so connected to someone else that one person's life provides the life-giving nourishment needed for the other's existence. John frames abiding in Christ as the involvement of God in all the parts of daily life. Followers of Christ learn to saturate their lives, their whole beings with the love of God in Christ, like sponges soaking up water. Our stories are then transformed by God's story as we immerse our lives in Christ. Abiding, therefore, must precede evangelism efforts, accompany evangelism efforts, and be the lead approach to all attempts at sharing the faith. Martha Grace Reese reports that "everyone – pastors, lay people, conference ministers, the whole congregation together – must have a live, current, attended-to-spiritual life."<sup>206</sup>

If abiding is the master biblical image in the theology of evangelism ministry, then story provides the practical guide for the work of evangelism: the stories of human beings intertwined with the story of God. The more aware a Christian becomes of the

---

<sup>206</sup>Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel*, 106.

story of God intersecting with his or her story, the more prepared that person is to make other appropriate relational connections. Conversely, the less connected to Christ one is, the less prepared that person is to faithfully engage in the process of Christian witness. While God's story is life-changing, what is most important is to break through the story and actually meet the person of Jesus Christ. The Scriptures invite us into a relationship, not simply into a story; it is the person of Jesus Christ, not just God's story that brings about transformation. Jesus declared (John 15:5) that "apart from me you can do nothing," and John reminded followers of Christ that the branches have one job—that of staying connected to the vine. It is not for the branch to worry about producing the fruit, only for the branch to stay intimately connected to the vine. Unable to earn the love of Christ, human beings learn to be open to Christ's tender hold on our hearts.

To abide in the triune God means ongoing devotion to Christ. Abiding in Christ leads organically to following Jesus Christ faithfully, depending on the Holy Spirit, and adoring God the Creator, what Robinson refers to as "bearing God to others."<sup>207</sup> Abiding is the first important story connection made in order to confidently, effectively share God's story with others. Abiding in Christ is also one of the great mysteries in the Christian life. A human being is effectively abiding, for example, when she begins to see changes in the way she treats people who are different than she. Transformation, not perfection, is the goal of abiding. The heart of this theology of ministry is a way of living life, a framework for understanding the process of change we experience in relationship with God, with other people, and with creation as we bear witness to the Creator. Out of a relationship with Christ and in the context of a relationship with another person,

---

<sup>207</sup>Robinson, *Godbearing*, 94.

evangelism can happen naturally: one life touching another life, life-on-life ministry.

Jesus' timeless model of abiding in the Father liberates those who follow him to engage in a form of evangelism that becomes less something we do and more something we live.

Abiding in Christ lays the groundwork for an approach to respectful, grace-filled, loving, fruitful evangelism that includes the following patterns of the heart. Personal surrender to God by trusting the Holy Spirit's impeccable timing directs our efforts to live authentically with others and witness to the life-giving sacrifice and embrace of Jesus Christ. The truest hope in discovering what God might be up to in another person's life cannot be realized without God's loving leadership. Dreams related to sharing God's story with another cannot be achieved without the Holy Spirit's working and speaking. God's story is known by the content to be learned about who God is and the reality to be experienced as the Holy Spirit is depended upon to guide storytellers into all truth at the pace and in the doses that listeners are ready to receive it. Since the way the gospel is shared is as much a sign of the good news as the words used to describe the gospel, this approach to evangelism is grounded in consistent prayer and in awareness of the profound ways the good news has affected the lives of the storytellers. Love, grace, and power for the work of evangelism are solidified in the life-long process of abiding in Christ. This ministry approach is based in the stories of Jesus and the general witness of Scripture that all human beings are invited to love God and love others. Learning the ministry of evangelism in the twenty-first century requires thinking critically about how faith sharing must change as a result of being led by abiding in Christ.

### **Ten Shifts in Faith Sharing<sup>208</sup>**

Imagining an effective theology of evangelism, guided by principles of abiding in Christ suggests ten shifts in faith sharing. First, evangelism is about stories more than steps and involves bringing human stories together in ordinary, conversational ways, not forcing people through a sequence of pre-determined steps. Second, it is honesty more than perfection (Phil. 3:12- 13), requiring the storyteller be sincere, not perfect. Third, it is about the ones with whom the story is being shared, more than the ones telling the story (1 Thess. 2:8), therefore allowing family and friends to be who they are as the storyteller discovers their stories. Fourth, it is about questions more than answers (John 4:1-31, Col. 4:6), obliging those who share their faith to fight the urge to offer trite answers for questions that not-yet-followers of Christ are not even asking. Fifth, it is listening more than telling (James 1:19), a practice built on the relational assumption that “people listen to people who listen.”<sup>209</sup> Sixth, it is hope not judgment (1 Pet. 3:15–16a), compelling Christ-followers to share the story of their need for Jesus and their hope in the faithfulness of God, rather than judging other people’s lifestyles, words, or choices. Seventh, it is the work of the Holy Spirit more than human programs (Rom. 8:26–30), which calls Christ followers to learn to be attentive to the leading of God’s Spirit in relationship to others. Evangelism, therefore, is not a process of working through tips or techniques in order to manipulate information about God into a conversation. Through

---

<sup>208</sup>Youth For Christ/USA, contributing writer, Jenny Morgan, *God’s Story as Told by John* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2007), xiv - xvii. This material is adapted and sourced also from an unpublished, untraceable white paper in Youth for Christ by Bill Muir, 1997.

<sup>209</sup>For this concept and its importance to twenty-first-century Christian witness, the writer is indebted to Youth for Christ’s DCLA [thus named due to the Washington DC and Los Angeles, CA conference locations] evangelism training conferences in 2000 and 2003, especially inspired by the creative insights of Jim Hancock, Todd Temple, Carla Lafayette, and Bill Muir.

prayer and spiritual attentiveness, Christians learn to bring Jesus' story into a human relationship at just the right moment. Eighth, it is circular more than linear (John 4:1-31) as people are invited to discover parts of Jesus' story that are relevant in their current stories. The story of Christ does not come to everyone in the same order or with the same words. Ninth, it is about loving more than knowing (1 Cor. 13: 1-2, 13) because in a postmodern world and from a biblical worldview, love wins people's hearts. Tenth, it is about contributing more than controlling, which means that story listeners and storytellers allow conversations to be free enough to flow and to bring Jesus naturally into those topics or discussions when the time is right.

The theology of ministry for evangelism offered to Sixth Avenue is summarized as a way of living the Christian life. This way of life is expressed in a story-centered framework, elevating the process of health and growth in our relationships with God, with people, and with the planet on which we live. The way of life is grounded in ongoing discoveries made while abiding in Christ, and practiced as prayer, listening, loving, serving, and telling stories of the good news. This way of life enables followers of Christ to be good news in the process of telling stories of the good news.

### **The Role of the Pastor in Upholding a Theology of Evangelism**

The pastor, as the key communicator and model of this way of life, is crucial to the actualization of the theology of ministry. The highest calling of the pastor, therefore, is abiding in Christ, consciously bearing the image of God in all that he or she does and says as an expression of personal identity and pastoral care. Within the context of abiding first and abiding always, the pastor functions within at least three roles: equipper, disciple maker, and evangelist. Ephesians 4 speaks of Jesus Christ as giving the Church "the

apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ ...to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ...so that it builds itself up in love.” The pastor must provide preaching, teaching, and modeling in order to address the fears, hesitancies, and barriers to Christian witness expressed by the people of Sixth Avenue. It is also important that the pastor embody basic principles of abiding in Christ in order to equip the ministry of evangelism.

The pastor, as equipper and disciple maker, engages the following priorities. Addressing abiding in Christ through sermons, adult Christian education classes, discussions, and intentional formation experiences becomes the centerpiece of the pastor’s work. Broadening worship, preaching, and teaching to include intentional preparation in appropriate spiritual disciplines for the purpose of personal and corporate transformation is important for evangelism as a way of life. At Sixth Avenue, Pastor Dan’s focus on contemplative, listening prayer already present in most worship services serves as a great example of communal, spiritual formation. Building upon this practice in other settings will be helpful for expanding abiding in Christ as a focal point of the church’s life. Practical examples might include a short-term adult Bible study focusing on John 15 and 1 John, a series of Sunday morning classes on deepening one’s prayer life, and regular prayer and Bible study experiences each month at leadership team meetings.

The pastor, as equipper and disciple maker, also lovingly tackles the congregation’s specific fears about evangelism and their concerns about being wrongly identified with a conservative, fundamentalist version of the Christian faith. One place to begin is to teach carefully about difficult, complicated theological issues related to ministry practices in the UCC, specifically for Sixth Avenue: hell, Christology, and



evangelism. Acknowledging the negative, damaging memories and feelings many have expressed around these issues, while also offering a renewed biblical vision of the way Jesus addressed them, will help the congregation imagine a new approach to evangelism. According to Reese one of the most crucial roles of any pastor is to “discern the vision for your congregation, hold it before the church and help the church navigate the changes. Preach well. Pray for the church....”<sup>210</sup> The discernment of which she writes is also essential for activating a theology of evangelism. Biblical exploration of the life and teachings of Jesus Christ would allow for love, humility, and respect within the broad theology of the UCC concerning hell, Christology, and the sharing of the good news.

Concerning hell, the writer would argue that what a Christ follower believes about hell is not a test or requirement for abiding in Christ or for fruitful evangelism. The paradigm offered in this paper is in no way motivated by a certain understanding of hell. The paper does not intend to provide answers to questions related to a theology of hell. The belief that following Jesus is the best way to live out one’s life on earth is enough motivation for evangelism without drawing on a fear-based call to avoid hell by accepting Jesus Christ as personal Lord and Savior.

Addressing Christology is more important than any other theological issue related to this theology of evangelism ministry. The pastor is the key communicator in making the congregation aware of how significantly different human beings are from Jesus Christ. Christ was fully human, in contrast with the fact that we are not yet fully human due to our brokenness and sin. Christ who is fully God is contrasted with human beings who can never be God. While Jesus shares our humanity, the triune God is absolutely

---

<sup>210</sup>Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel*, 139.

distinct from us. “With this tension in mind, we realize that we are called to enter into the fullness of our humanity, but we are not called to become Jesus,”<sup>211</sup> even as we engage in personal transformation into the image of Jesus Christ and move toward flourishing as human beings and enabling the flourishing of creation.

The “cringe factor” associated with the word evangelism represents another need from the congregation. This need may be met effectively by helping people become more comfortable talking about Jesus Christ in their own lives and stories, rather than exclusively in the context of sermons in the church. Articulating a deeper, richer meaning of evangelism will help. Proclaiming the liberating God, who is committed to redeeming and recreating the whole web of creation out of brokenness, provides a more expansive theology of evangelism and is, in fact, one of the gifts the UCC can offer to the Church at large. Integrating service, in the name of Jesus Christ, as an expression of the authentic, beloved community of the body of Christ also will provide progress in the reclamation of the word *evangelism*. Preaching at Sixth Avenue can also address issues related to personal and corporate sin and the need for forgiveness from God and one another.

As the pastoral role relates to equipping and disciple making, this theology of ministry respectfully suggests preaching less dogmatically against evangelicalism and instead offering a distinctly UCC version of non-oppressive, non-judgmental, non-fear-based Christian witness in the world. To be consistent, this approach to witnessing must listen more compassionately to friends and enemies, strangers and companions, and the traditionally conservative and liberal sides of controversial social and theological issues. Encouraging the laity to embrace and own personal identities as followers of Jesus Christ

---

<sup>211</sup>Robinson, *Godbearing*, 86.

will be accomplished as the pastor intentionally absorbs the role of equipper and disciple maker, first on behalf of lay leaders, and second for the members of Sixth Avenue. The final role of the pastor in this theology of ministry is that of evangelist.

The pastoral role of evangelist centers on awareness of who is listening and for whom the gospel content is being contextualized. With a gospel of God's love and abhorrence of hell-motivated evangelism found at the church, it is very important that the pastor preach a gospel that reconciles these matters. Hope-centered evangelism cannot be overstated for the UCC. "Mortimer Arias proposes that 'To be an evangelist is to be a sign of hope, a servant of hope, a minister of hope.' This means we [the pastor and the congregation] are to embody hope as Jesus did...."<sup>212</sup>

The pastor as evangelist also includes a more thorough theology of conversion. UCC pastors in general and at Sixth Avenue in particular, can provide insightful explanations of conversion in order to set the stage for lay people to engage in the process of evangelism. Robinson's notion of conversion as reorientation is helpful, though incomplete. She focuses on human beings turning to God, which includes repentance—by faith moving away from an old way of living and reorienting oneself to a new way of life. To her understanding that "the wholeness and integrity of the human being [is] a key to how conversion should be understood,"<sup>213</sup> I wish to add that the intention of evangelism is to provide opportunities for conversion to any and all who are interested in turning to God. Conversion presents some difficulty and unease for the UCC. The UCC in general has been "spooked" by the fundamentalist version of Christianity, evangelism,

---

<sup>212</sup>Robinson, *Godbearing*, 51.

<sup>213</sup>*Ibid.*, 57; see also 140-152.

and conversion. Robinson writes, “The mistake we made was to equate a method of evangelism with evangelism itself.”<sup>214</sup> Since one of the chief objectives of this model for evangelism is ultimately the conversion of those who do not yet follow Jesus Christ, defining conversion more clearly is very important.

Conversion can be understood generally as more than an event in the life of a human being. While the apostle Paul and others (only 15 percent of Christian people, according to Dr. Richard Peace of the UCC<sup>215</sup>) have experienced Damascus Road encounters resulting in sudden conversions to Jesus Christ, this is not the norm at Sixth Avenue. Nor is it the norm at most UCC churches in the Metro Denver Association of the Rocky Mountain Conference of the UCC, including First Plymouth UCC and the personal experience of the writer. Conversion to Jesus Christ is conversion to a new way of living that initiates definite transformation in a person’s life. The theology of ministry suggested here includes a positive view of what St. Patrick referred to as “the ministry of conversion...after [ongoing prayer and spiritual companionship over the course of] some days, or weeks, you would find yourself believing what these Christians believe and they would invite you to commit your life to Christ.”<sup>216</sup> Very helpful for Sixth Avenue is St. Patrick’s understanding that conversion takes place in the context of “Christian community...and the ministry of conversation.”<sup>217</sup> Additionally, I find resolve, along

---

<sup>214</sup>Richard V. Peace, *Rediscovering Evangelism* (Cleveland: United Church of Christ Congregational Vitality and Discipleship: Local Church Ministries, 2009), 1-2.

<sup>215</sup>As previously noted in chapter 3, Dr. Peace argues that, in the New Testament, there are two paradigms for conversion (punctiliar and process), not merely instantaneous conversion events.

<sup>216</sup>Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 52-53.

<sup>217</sup>*Ibid.*, 99.

with Dr. Peace, in believing that “at the core of Christian conversion is a *conscious awareness* that we are striving to follow Jesus.”<sup>218</sup>

Specifically, Pastor Dan’s rich vision for the development of a theologizing community is supplemented by an understanding of the content of the gospel as the “revelation of who God is, what it means to be human, and God’s reconciling love: the in-breaking presence and future promise of the restoration of radical relationship for the whole creation.”<sup>219</sup> Robinson and Pastor Dan include in their understanding of the gospel the physical realities of all creation, a welcome correction for me and for the people of Sixth Avenue, many of whom have been damaged by past experiences of evangelism.

### **The Role of the Laity in the Ministry of Evangelism**

With the laity as the focus for the program offered in chapter 6, brief mention is made here of their vital role in the ministry of evangelism. Based on her research related to effective evangelism in mainline churches, Reese asserts that “members of the congregation do much more direct evangelism than pastors.”<sup>220</sup> The lay person’s part in evangelism, described here as disciple and witness, is crucial to the effectiveness of evangelism in the local church setting. Lay people serving as gospel bringers is consistent with the UCC’s commitment to the priesthood of all believers and the denomination’s view that the pastor equips the saints for good works in the world. Miroslav Volf’s insights concerning the priority of lay activity in the Church support the ecclesiology of the UCC. “In all churches, faith is mediated and kept alive above all by the so-called

---

<sup>218</sup>Peace, *Rediscovering Evangelism*, 8.

<sup>219</sup>Robinson, *Godbearing*, 63.

<sup>220</sup>Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel*, 112.

laity, that is, in families, in one's neighborhood, or in the workplace: without the lay activity of faith mediation, there would be no living church."<sup>221</sup>

A high value inherent in the ministry of the laity requires that their lives demonstrate an on-going process of personal conversion to Christ. The storytelling, listening, message bringing follower of Christ is first and foremost compelled by a love that grows out of abiding in Christ. We love because, in Christ, God first loved us. In this sense, lay persons are disciples of Christ who follow the way of Jesus and witness to the Father's love and goodness in the world.

Following Christ as a life-long journey includes learning to be a witness to the one being followed. Christian discipleship recognizes the "profound importance of story and fashions frameworks for hearing, telling, valuing, and confirming story: individual life story, faith-journey story, the biblical story and stories, the church's story."<sup>222</sup> The weighty importance of the transformative power of story in this theology of ministry cannot be overestimated. The ministry of reconciliation and the story of reconciliation are fueled by love and must include witnessing to Christ as the source of new life and the redeemer of all people who come to him in faith.

Paul's summary of the ministry of reconciliation in 2 Corinthians 5:14-21, translated in Today's New International Version of the Bible below, centers the theology of ministry suggested for Sixth Avenue as evangelism rediscovered.

---

<sup>221</sup>Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1998), 227.

<sup>222</sup>Marian R. Plant, *Faith Formation in Vital Congregations* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2009), 17-18.

<sup>14</sup>For Christ's love compels us, because we are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died. <sup>15</sup>And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again. <sup>16</sup>So from now on we regard no one from a worldly point of view. Though we once regarded Christ in this way, we do so no longer. <sup>17</sup>Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here! <sup>18</sup>All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: <sup>19</sup>that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting people's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation. <sup>20</sup>We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God. <sup>21</sup>God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the theology of ministry offered to the community at Sixth Avenue is a story framework concerned primarily with how Jesus went about evangelism, observed in the particular patterns of interaction with people in his life. This chapter is most concerned with the foundations for effective evangelism, which are modeled in Christ's intimate, abiding relationship with God the Father throughout his life on earth. Abiding in Christ is the primary story line of a Christian's journey of faith. The stories of Jesus then become the model for evangelism in the context of intimate, ongoing abiding in Christ. Empowered by the pastor in the ministry of evangelism and in order to elevate the role of the laity, the church must resist the "tendency to disqualify the laity...."<sup>223</sup>

In an effort to counter this trend, Part Three provides a series of eight weeks of small group, Bible study experiences for the people of Sixth Avenue to use in preparation for effective Christian witness in Denver, Colorado. The series is written for adults, with the strong suggestion that the church's youth ministry adapt the sessions for use also with

---

<sup>223</sup>Volf, *After Our Likeness*, 228.

a small group of high school students. The ethos of the theology of evangelism ministry presented to Sixth Avenue UCC rests in an understanding that “the heart of evangelism is having an alive relationship with God, being part of a church you love, and caring that people outside the church find what you’ve discovered.”<sup>224</sup> The ambition of the theology of evangelism ministry and, by extension, the strategy that follows is to nurture lay people and then watch for the outcomes, the fruit that only God can produce. Underlying is the hope of increasing the impact Sixth Avenue UCC has in Denver by sharing the fullness of God’s love for the sake of “the restoration of the whole of creation.”<sup>225</sup>

---

<sup>224</sup>Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel*, 6.

<sup>225</sup>Plant, *Faith Formation*, 67.



## PART THREE

### STRATEGY

#### CHAPTER 6

#### STRATEGIES FOR EMPOWERING LAY CHRISTIAN WITNESS AT SIXTH AVENUE UCC

Part Three charts and evaluates a practical strategy for empowering lay Christians to engage actively and naturally in evangelism in their families, communities, workplaces, neighborhoods, and friendship circles. Derived from the ways Jesus Christ interacted with people, this section champions a listening-focused, conversation-based, story-centered, welcoming approach to witness. Christian witness is defined broadly through the “Five Marks of Mission,”<sup>226</sup> which are integrated into the opening of each small group. The strategy is delivered primarily through a series of eight ninety-minute small groups intended for eight to twelve lay Christians, who commit to share in the experience together over eight consecutive weeks.<sup>227</sup> In the future, after the test case facilitated by the author, the groups will be best led by someone who has experienced the small group as a member in the past. To guide the groups, weekly handouts, including

---

<sup>226</sup>Walls and Ross, eds., *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, xi-xiv.

<sup>227</sup> Participant material for three of these sessions is given in Appendix B.

activities, media resources, and assignments, are in the Appendix. Part Three concludes as chapter 7 articulates a thorough evaluation of the small group test case, which took place from January through March 2010 in Denver, Colorado. Relevant ministry practices of St. Francis and St. Patrick and a selection of five film clips are used as secondary support to the biblical texts on which the groups are based. The passages were reviewed in chapter 4, and key skill sets for effective, respectful evangelism were developed. The five skill sets are to be practiced by lay followers of Christ and are modeled after patterns gleaned from the way of life lived by Jesus Christ.

The first of five skill sets is listening skills, demonstrated and practiced through the content of a small group session using John 4:1-26. Second, conversation skills are demonstrated and practiced through the content of a second small group session based on John 4:1-42. Third, abiding in Christ is learned and experienced in the small group community using John 15:1-11. Fourth, storytelling skills are demonstrated and practiced through the content of three small groups based on Luke 10:25-37, Luke 19:1-10, and the Gospel of John's account of Nicodemus in John 3:1-21, 7:45-52, and 19:38-42. The focus of storytelling is learning to put one's faith into words. Fifth, through the content of one small group, welcoming skills are demonstrated and practiced as witness to those living in poverty based on Mark 10:46-52, and welcoming skills are demonstrated and practiced as witness and care for society's marginalized from Luke 17:11-19. The focus is learning to live radically generous lives and learning to invite the marginalized into the community of the local church.

Each small group session is guided by a similar outline, including weekly introductory material intended to provide focus, the skill to be learned, a Bible passage, a

brief contextual explanation with important definitions and descriptions that frame each passage, an experience through media or art, optional extra material, guiding questions for conversation, prayers, applications for practice, an ending exercise, and occasional optional assignments to be completed before the next meeting. The eight small groups are written for use by a facilitator. Five ground rules for spiritually and relationally safe small groups are intended to ensure a positive experience for all small group members and are to be read aloud each week.

The weekly introductory material includes the group ground rules, vision statement, marks of mission, purpose statement, guiding assumption upon which the material is based, and the specific objective of each session. These make up the kernel of pertinent data necessary for answering common sense questions like “why are we doing this?” and “what are we trying to accomplish?” Recorded here and summarized in each handout, the facilitator reminds the small group of this kernel of information every session. The nature of how the small groups are delivered is a reflection of the content, and, therefore, the kernel is to be reviewed by the facilitator each session as a way to frame the vision and the objectives of the learning process.

The ground rules include five directives, but adaptations can be made by a group if all the members agree to the changes, which are then to be recorded in the handouts. First, all members and the leader are asked to agree to be present and on time to each group meeting. Second, everyone is asked to agree to be a listener, listening attentively to the stories, questions, concerns, and prayers of each person. Third, all members and the leader are asked to agree to be authentic by being real and honest in the sharing of their stories, questions, concerns, and prayers. The choice to be silent is available since being

silent may be the most honest response. The fourth ground rule is to be respectful of differing experiences, opinions, and thoughts, as well as the time limitation on the group process. Fifth, the group is asked to be confidential: what is shared in the group stays in the group.

The vision for the strategy is that followers of Christ would reflect in their daily lives an expanded understanding of the gospel, an “unbinding of the good news that God adores us and everyone else, [and] that God has shown this to us through Jesus Christ.”<sup>228</sup> An energetic, holistic approach to the gospel incites Christ-followers to view the world through the five marks of mission: “To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom; to teach, baptize, and nurture new believers; to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.”<sup>229</sup> Brief reflection and discussion about the vision over the eight weeks may result in shifting the language of the vision during the program. These changes are recorded in the weekly handouts.

The purpose is to provide an adaptable strategy that empowers lay people to share their faith in Jesus Christ in authentic, respectful ways. The guiding assumption upon which the material is based is that, some day, the people in the small group will desire to share their faith in Christ. Whatever their individual contexts, at some point when someone asks a question about why a person believes in God, the experience of the material will prepare participants to respond from a loving posture with solid reasons why they trust Jesus Christ. The assumption is that the likelihood of being asked about

---

<sup>228</sup>Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel*, 3.

<sup>229</sup>Walls and Ross, eds., *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, xi-xiv.

one's faith is high, particularly if those who follow Christ are living the way of love.

“And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way” (1 Pet. 3:15-16 NLT).

The objectives, while specifically stated for each session, are expressed generally as five skills sets designed to increase confidence in faith sharing. The skill sets are listening, conversing, abiding in Christ, storytelling, and welcoming. Practicing and learning these five skills (specified on page 131) help to shape a way of life characterized by the way of love and fueled by the knowledge and experience that God does indeed adore us, all of us, and all of creation. Each of the following eight sessions begins with a prayer initiated by the facilitator or a volunteer, and it is the responsibility of the facilitator to monitor the time throughout and offer to go first for most of the activities.

### **Small Group #1 Topic: Listening Skills in John 4:1-26**

#### **Introduction Activity**

The weekly introductory material, also called the kernel, is presented during dinner and participants introduce themselves briefly, beginning with their full name and where they have lived over the course of their life. Introductions might instead include how long the person has attended the church (or what caused them to visit Sixth Avenue UCC), what initially drew them to participate in the small group, and what they hope to accomplish by being in the group.

#### **Leader's Script**

After dinner and the introductions are complete, the facilitator moves into the session material for about ten minutes. “The stories of Jesus are so old and familiar that

the wonder may be blunted.’<sup>230</sup> The experience of our small group begins as we attempt to hear one of the stories of Jesus in a fresh way, which will later assist us in learning to tell our own stories with a compelling, inviting voice. This week, we approach evangelism as listening. Forsaking more agenda-driven forms of listening, we are attempting to learn from Jesus about sincere listening. The importance of listening cannot be exaggerated. ‘You’re not seeking recruits, but listening to the heart of the other . . . even at the expense of your own interest. And proper listening to somebody else requires recognition of that person, the context of their narrative.’<sup>231</sup> Our objective this week is to practice the art of listening to one another and to make connections between listening and evangelism. Dietrich Bonhoeffer takes us to the heart of the matter in a book published just before the outbreak of World War II.”

The facilitator asks for a different volunteer to read the long quotation from the handouts and then invites comments or reactions to the quote. The quote ends with these words.

There is a kind of listening with half an ear that presumes already to know what the other person has to say. It is an impatient, inattentive listening, that despises the brother [or sister] and is only waiting for a chance to speak and thus get rid of the other person . . . Christians have forgotten that the ministry of listening has been committed to them by [God] who is . . . the great listener and whose work they should share.<sup>232</sup>

The leader again speaks for about five minutes. “As we move into John 4, a story that most of us are familiar with, background is required in order for twenty-first-century

---

<sup>230</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 107.

<sup>231</sup>Aram Haroutunian, “No One Closer: A Conversation with James Houston,” *Mars Hill Review* Issue 6, Fall 1996, <http://www.leaderu.com/marshall/mhr06/houston1.html> (accessed March 19, 2010).

<sup>232</sup>Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, translated by John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper & Row, 1954), 97-99. (Adaptations for the use of appropriate gender language have been inserted.)

people to understand the great risks taken by Jesus to care for the woman's spiritual life. The twenty centuries between us and the woman at the well, along with the significant cultural differences, create an enormous gap that can result in distracting misunderstandings. Her conversation with Jesus occurred in the midst of an adventure where Jesus and his followers moved through the notoriously unfriendly territory of Samaria, land separating Jerusalem and Galilee. Jesus talked with a woman of Samaritan descent, who lived in the town of Sychar. In the broad context of Jesus' interaction with this nameless woman, the religious offence committed by Jesus cannot be overstated. Beginning in verse 7, he initiated a culturally forbidden dialogue with a woman whose sexual reputation was shameful. The conversation was made more appalling by her religious lineage, which would have been despicable to any law-abiding Jewish male. The fact that he drank from her cup, which should have been considered contaminated, combined with the fact that he remained in an intimate conversation with her was remarkable and unparalleled by any religious leader of the day."

"The ensuing five-part question-and-answer dialogue between the woman and Jesus provides some guidance for developing better listening skills. The first question (John 4:7) posed by Jesus to the approaching woman is '[Can you] give me a drink?' His conversation partner must have been stunned as Jesus scandalously engaged with her and continued with an outrageously unexpected response. 'If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water' (John 4:10 The Message). The shock value of the conversation deepens as we see in Jesus a desire to prioritize people as a part of the way of life he lived."

“Scripture does not offer formulas in relation to evangelism; however, the following observations can be made about Jesus. When Jesus encountered the woman, he was attentive to her. Jesus loved people where they were, tailoring the telling of God’s Story for the purpose of relationship with the individual, in this case, a despised woman. Jesus was fully present with people, consistently speaking the truth in love, interacting personally and compassionately. Learning to live the way Jesus lived involves two relational disciplines supported by John 4, the disciplines of discovery and disclosure. After we hear the story, you will be asked to go back and look at the story with two people forming a conversation triplet to answer the following questions. What was it like to be this woman? How did Jesus listen to her? Imagine and talk about the possible shock factor inherent in their conversation.”

Anticipating needing fifteen minutes, the leader asks for three volunteers to read John 4:1 – 26. The text is read aloud as follows: one of the volunteers reads the dialogue of Jesus, a second reads the dialogue of the woman at the well, and the third reader reads the other segments as the narrator. Group members are instructed to volunteer if they enjoy reading aloud and are willing to read the text as though they were speaking from the voice of the woman, of Jesus, or of John, the narrator, who wrote the words nineteen hundred years ago. Following the reading, the leader thanks the readers and offers an illustration, a brief explanation of the context, a few suggestions, questions for conversation and practice, an ending exercise, and a prayer.

The leader again speaks, planning ten minutes for this portion. “In the course of rediscovering how to do to evangelism, the relational discipline of discovery requires learning to listen attentively as the beginning point for sharing our faith. To share one’s



faith, a person must discover another person's story because the best way to help someone hear about Christ's love is for that person to hear and experience Christ's love from another human being. True listening is an act of love. We can be intentional in discovering a person's story by remembering three suggestions for listening."

"The first suggestion based on John 4 is: be present. Being present in someone's life means that we step into a person's world in order to be with that person, just as Jesus stepped into the woman's world and made himself available to listen and converse with her. To be present implies that our energy is not focused on finding solutions to problems, but bringing our whole selves, gently, fully, authentically to another person in the present moment. An indicator of presence is the willingness to lay aside our own concerns or interests and just be with the person. Presence requires listening well when someone speaks and remaining in a listening posture when they are silent."

"The second suggestion for discovering someone's story is: be attentive. Being attentive means you create space in your life to attend to someone else's thoughts, joys, hopes, dreams, and heartaches. One indicator of being attentive is that you sit still with your body at rest and settled. Being attentive requires listening well when someone speaks and remaining in the listening posture when they are silent."

"The third suggestion for discovering another person's story based on John 4 is: be inquisitive. Discovering a person's story by being inquisitive communicates interest and love. Being inquisitive means skillfully using questions as tools to discover the unfolding story of another human being. We must keep in mind that we are not trying to convert someone; we are trying to discover parts of his or her story. One indicator of being inquisitive is that we remember what a person says, we remember the person's

stories. We do not correct or try to change the person; we simply discover parts of his or her story. The result of being authentically inquisitive is loving, human connection and the beginning of relational intimacy. Being inquisitive requires listening well when someone speaks and remaining in the listening posture when the person is silent.”

The next portion is expected to last ten minutes. “In the handouts, please find the five hints for learning to be inquisitive in order to listen well. The first hint—use questions to find common ground—is modeled in John 4:7. What is the common ground established between Jesus and the woman? The second hint—asking tough questions gently—is important because some stories are too scary or painful to tell right away. The third hint—asking clarifying questions—helps the listener to ascertain if he or she understands a person’s story accurately. The fourth hint—making use of permission-asking questions—communicates respect. For example, one might ask: ‘May I tell you part of my story? May I ask you about how faith might be relevant in this situation?’ The fifth hint for being inquisitive in order to listen well—asking questions without question marks—can help to reduce defensiveness. Consider a few examples of questions without question marks. ‘Tell me about your family; I want to hear more about that; tell me how that situation is working out for you.’ For the next few minutes, we return to our triplets and consider more conversation questions from the handouts.”

“Learning to ask questions of genuine interest and concern is an effective part of listening and, therefore, an important aspect of respectful evangelism. People are looking for friends, not evangelists, friends who have enough time and patience to listen attentively and authentically. If a person you know believes you are listening because you have an agenda, that person may not trust you. To listen well means listening in order to

love, not to convert. In order to practice being inquisitive, being attentive, and being present, we begin some individual brainstorming.”

Over the next ten minutes, “Create a wish list by writing out the first names of five to ten or more people on the back of your handout. To whom would you like to listen more authentically and more attentively? Examples include specific friends, family members, co-workers, neighbors, even enemies, anyone to whom you would like to learn to listen more attentively as an expression of the good news of God. We begin this activity with a few minutes of quiet.” After the group has had time to pray, think, and write, begin a short time of silent prayer. Simply invite everyone to stand in a circle and privately ask God to help us find specific opportunities to listen to each person on our lists over the next two months. Invite the group also to hold their wish lists in their hands, close to their hearts. “Please bring your wish list to each of the next seven sessions.”

### Ending Exercise

“This should take fifteen minutes altogether. For our ending exercise this evening, we will practice listening to one another. Find a partner, someone with whom you have not talked much tonight. Each of you will have five minutes to practice listening to the other. A list of possible questions can be found on your handout. Feel free to add your own questions or ask follow-up questions. Concentrate also on being present, attentive, and inquisitive as you listen with your ears, your heart, and your body language. Maintain a patient, calm focus on the person talking rather than on yourself.”

“It is important in our relationships with people that they not perceive themselves as the object of some kind of religious or evangelistic goal. Rather, we hope they see themselves in a developing friendship built on the merits of the relationship itself.” When

this activity ends, offer a brief prayer to Jesus that each of the group participants would find ways to practice listening to God and to some of the people on their wish lists over the next week. Before the session ends, the leader reminds the group of the session objective: to learn to listen to one another and to begin to make connections between listening and evangelism. “Tonight we honed our listening skills. In order to reinforce listening as an important entry point for evangelism, we will now go around our circle for a listening check. Each of us tells the group what we heard our conversation partner share as we listened to her or him. The two optional assignments are to read the short UCC booklet *16 Reasons I Love Jesus* and the UCC booklet *Rediscovering Evangelism*, by Dr. Richard Peace.”<sup>233</sup> The facilitator gives everyone a copy of both booklets and communicates that all optional assignments are designed to enhance learning but are not obligatory.

### **Small Group #2 Topic: Conversation Skills in John 4:7-42**

#### **Introductory Activity**

To begin, the leader provides brief background for “The Big Kahuna” and the group watches the film clip together. (The introduction is expected to last for twenty minutes.) The leader says, “The Big Kahuna is the story of three salesmen attending a business convention in Kansas City where they are on assignment selling industrial lubricants. The movie, based on a one-act play, stars Kevin Spacey, Danny DeVito, and Peter Facinelli, and takes place almost exclusively inside the hotel suite occupied by two of the salesmen. The short scene we are about to watch occurs near the end of the film,

---

<sup>233</sup>Peace, *Rediscovering Evangelism*, and The Stillspeaking Writer’s Group, *16 Reasons I Love Jesus* (Cleveland: The Congregational Vitality Initiative, Local Church Ministries of the UCC, 2008).

following an angry conflict among the three men. The youngest, most inexperienced of the three, Bob, has apparently lost the targeted new client. Instead of meeting the potential buyer and initiating a sale, Bob chose to share his faith in Jesus Christ with the man. Kevin Spacey's character is furious because he believes the sale of a lifetime has slipped through his fingers. We pick up the story as Bob picks himself up off the floor, following a very physical argument with the other salesmen about whether it is acceptable for him to talk about Jesus with a prospective customer instead of selling lubricants. We watch now as Danny DeVito's character gives some hard feedback to Bob, the young salesman."

After watching the video, a brief group discussion ensues. The leader asks, "Was Bob a good witness? Why or why not?" A few guiding questions for conversation are intended to help the group talk about whether and why they agree or disagree with various quotations from the clip. These can be found in the handouts.

#### Leader's Script

In order to conclude this conversation, the facilitator connects Danny DeVito's speech back to listening skills and reviews the kernel of introductory material focusing on the five marks of mission. (This connecting section should last for ten minutes.) The facilitator says, "To summarize the good news we hope to share, we review the five marks of mission in order to attempt to be aligned with God's great story of redemption. God's love and the expression of God's mission require a gospel that is big enough to embrace all human beings including the poor, the marginalized, those in need, and those who suffer. The good news must include every person created by God as well as the proper stewardship of the earth. The end result is that God's work of blessing the nations,

destroying evil, and redeeming all of creation will ultimately reveal God's glory, goodness, and love in all the earth." The topic of the session, learning conversation skills, begins as the leader asks everyone to share one of their favorites from the UCC booklet *16 Reasons I Love Jesus*, or one meaningful insight from Dr. Peace's booklet, or something meaningful remembered from last week's session (sharing for about five minutes).

"As we review last week and frame John 4:7-42 (for about ten minutes), two reminders related to having an agenda are important. First, the intention of our wish lists is not to recruit people to a way of thinking, nor is it to use people on the list to practice evangelizing. On the contrary, our wish lists provide focus on real people who are currently in our lives so that, as we learn to listen and converse, we are engaged in more than theoretical communication skills. We are bringing good news into the world by loving specific people through listening. For now, take a few moments and copy your wish list or add names onto page 4 of the handouts. Secondly, the context of the story in John 4 is critical. By grappling with the context, we, the readers of the story, do our best to see through the woman's eyes, which enables us to experience the radical nature of their conversation. The wide social and religious gap that existed between the nameless woman at the well and Jesus is gigantic. For Jesus, a male, trained as a Jewish Rabbi, any conversation with an admitted adulterer, a female Samaritan, who was perceived as spiritually misinformed, should have not occurred. This despicable interaction crossed well-worn religious, cultural, and social boundaries. The simple occurrence of the story in the book of John is evidence of a preposterous gospel of love that violates established norms for how people of different social, religious, racial, or gender status were to be

treated. Jesus demonstrated a way of love so fiercely radical that, as we learn a new way of sharing our faith, we must consider him a wildly unique extremist.”

“Learning to share our faith as a way of life is quite unlike selling or marketing. Rather, listening well and having respectful conversations in order to love people is the framework for sharing our faith. John 4:1- 42 can help us.” The facilitator asks for two volunteers to read verses 7- 26 and 27- 42 aloud. Following the reading, the group leader thanks the readers and continues (for ten minutes). “The second part of the story draws our attention to how the woman’s experience in conversation with Jesus influenced her life and her community.” The following discussion in pairs from the handouts is intended to attract group participants into the biblical story through conversation together.

The next portion should take fifteen minutes. The facilitator says, “To consider a listening-focused, conversation-based approach to evangelism creates a multitude of uncertainties and a loss of control on the part of the ones trying to share their faith. The style of evangelism being suggested expects and accepts ambiguities naturally inherent in listening and conversing. Learning conversation skills includes the relational discipline of disclosing my story, which involves learning to be genuine while learning to express some of the ways that I connect with Christ and find hope in God. Like offering someone a backstage pass to my life where that person can see who I truly am, I practice and learn healthy, personal disclosure. A portion of the story of who I am is the fact that I am learning to depend on Jesus Christ.”

“To become more confident with self-disclosure in faith sharing, we practice two conversation skills. First, be real. To share my faith with a person, I disclose my story, a story that includes specific information about why and how I depend on God. The truth is

I cannot suggest that anyone else might need God without showing them that I need God as much today as the day God found me. Being real begins when one human shares important pieces of his or her life story in ways that eventually lead to deeper connections. This kind of sharing pulls us toward relational risks and modeling transparency, which enables friendships to grow. To be real is to come clean with God and with others. It is important to tell others how much you want deeper connection with God and why you want those connections. Meaningful moments surface in our relationships when we have been real and listened authentically; these are moments of grace.”

“The second conversation skill to be practiced in order to be more confident with sharing our faith is learning to talk about Jesus. In order to include our spiritual journey in conversations with people, we reveal the ways we depend on Jesus Christ. As we learn to communicate how we depend on Christ, the people around us have a chance to see and perhaps experience for themselves that God is dependable, trustworthy, and loving. The end result is that God gets the center stage of our stories. In current North American culture, talking about God or gods is common, even popular. We want to learn to go beyond god-talk and identify the difference that being connected to and loved by Jesus Christ makes in our lives. In order to practice talking specifically about Jesus, we integrate into our conversations some of what we are learning about Christ in our lives. We speak about Jesus naturally in ways that uncover the stories of how God is working everywhere. We include God and pieces of God’s story early on in conversations with people who are important to us, including Jesus’ compassion for the world and for individual people. This inclusion, while it may feel awkward in the learning, becomes



natural and unselfconscious over time. The goal is not to practice telling God's entire story the first time we have a meaningful conversation; however, speaking about Jesus naturally and confidently is advisable early on in our relationships. This approach is a genuine way to be in relationship with other human beings as we dedicate our selves to following Christ."

"Colossians 4:5-6 reminds us that it is not just what, but how we share and relate to others that matters. 'Conduct yourselves wisely toward outsiders, making the most of the time. Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.' As Christ-followers practice the two relational disciplines of discovery and disclosure, we seek to love people first and always. We make the most of every opportunity by paying close attention to God's work in our lives, in the world around us, and in other people's lives and stories. To receive living water, like the woman at the well, is what helps us discover another human being's story and disclose our own stories. By staying connected to Christ over time, a person can soak up the living water freely given by Jesus and then allow the living water to overflow from their lives into the lives of others. To saturate one's life with living water is the beginning of witnessing to the good news that the water is available to everyone. This is the way of life that guides followers of Christ to be good news while telling stories of the good news."

### Ending Exercise

The facilitator says, "The ending exercise for this evening (which should take twenty minutes) involves pairing up with your listening and conversation partner and using the questions for conversation to attempt to go a little deeper into self-disclosure. We will practice conversation skills for a few minutes and then end with a self-reflection,

where you are asked to name for yourself a connection you discovered tonight between conversation and evangelism. You will write two sentences in two minutes using the following outline from your handouts.”

Each participant is instructed to complete two sentences. “I connected this conversation with my partner to sharing my faith by telling him or her about. . . . I connected this conversation to sharing my faith by hearing my partner talk about. . . .

### **Small Group #3 Topic: Abiding in Christ in John 15:1-11**

#### **Introductory Activity**

After reviewing the introductory material—the kernel, the third small group topic, abiding in Christ, begins and is integrated throughout the rest of the sessions. (This introductory activity should take fifteen minutes.) The objective of this session is to learn what it means to abide in Christ and to make personal connections back to evangelism because we are striving to be good news as we learn to share the good news.

John 15:1-11 is read aloud from the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible by a volunteer, followed by the group leader’s explanation of the context, one illustration, a DVD experience, questions for conversation, an ending exercise, and a prayer. The leader says, “The overlap of God’s story and a human being’s story is one image useful for describing abiding. The idea of stories being interconnected helps us to think carefully about our own abiding relationship with Jesus Christ. Since spiritual activity, like attending church or serving at a food bank, cannot replace intimacy with God, Christians must learn to give ample attention to abiding in Christ. Notice how many times in John 15:1-11 the word *abide* is written. Take a moment and circle it each time you see it. How many do you find? Jesus uses this illustration masterfully. As we consider it, the context

of the passage reminds us how important the words of Christ in John 15 were then and are now. Just days from being betrayed, arrested, and eventually crucified, Jesus shared intimate moments with his followers in order to prepare them for the journey of faithfully following God after the resurrection.”

### Leader’s Script

The next portion should last fifteen minutes. The leader says, “To connect, to be nearby, to be attached, to remain in God’s love, or to abide in the vine are descriptions of abiding in Christ. If we are not near God in our daily lives, we will not be able to offer lasting, meaningful witness to the realm of God. Jesus invites us to remain in him because he is like the vine and we are like the branches. Imagine two contrasting branches of grapes.” The leader provides a visual demonstration with two bunches of grapes. “One is full of ripe, juicy, delicious looking grapes. The other appears more like a near empty, dried out branch containing a few, shriveled up, nasty looking grapes. The first branch is fruitful. The second branch is absent of grapes; they no longer are connected to the branch nor is the branch connected to the vine. They have lost their use because they are disconnected. If the branch had remained attached to the vine, these grapes would continue to receive nourishment and would be supported and nurtured by the vine.”

“Because we are beginning to desire that the people around us might one day consider following Jesus, we learn to demonstrate the ways our lives are lovingly connected to the vine, to God. In order to have life, branches remain connected to the vine. One way to stay connected is through spiritual disciplines, or spiritual habits, which enable followers of Christ to learn to walk through life with God in natural, energizing

ways. Spiritual disciplines are like spiritual exercises or training about which Paul writes to Timothy. ‘Train yourself in godliness, for, while physical training is of some value, godliness is valuable in every way, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come...we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all people, especially of those who believe’ (1 Tim 4:7-10).”<sup>234</sup>

“Disciplines or habits are not intended to measure spiritual growth or to keep us near God, but they can be useful for softening our hearts so that the Holy Spirit molds us into all that God desires for us. Regularly practiced disciplines extend an open invitation to God, offering the Spirit access to the deep places of the heart. Spiritual disciplines are powerful when they are an expression of trust in Christ. They serve as practice for living like Jesus lived and for living with Jesus in daily life. The eventual outcome is the building up of a person’s capacity for genuine, faith-inspired, God-given mercy, grace, and righteousness expressed through loving God and loving others. We are going to examine three spiritual habits that help us remain connected to God.”

This part should take five minutes for each of the habits. The leader says, “The first habit is surrender. Like the early followers of Jesus, it is often in our emptiness that we see God’s abundance. As we learn and practice the discipline of surrendering to God, we empty ourselves and make room for the Holy Spirit. In the Christian life, we surrender our wills when we are finally convinced that our human efforts will not thrive apart from God. More than a one-time decision, surrender occurs frequently as we discover areas of life that we cling to and areas we attempt to control. We learn through

---

<sup>234</sup>Because the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) is the common translation of the Bible used in the UCC among ministers and lay people, chapter 6 relies almost exclusively on the NRSV. Translations other than the NRSV are footnoted.

practice and a supportive Christian community how to release our lives over to God, often small bits at a time, occasionally large significant pieces of our lives. Surrender is a long, continuous process of growth, a quality of life not a state of perfection.”

“Proverbs 3:5-6 is helpful. ‘Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own insight. In all your ways acknowledge him, and he will make straight your paths.’ Surrender can be thought of as unqualified reliance on the living God. The result of surrendering to God is that over time a person becomes more deeply and intimately acquainted with Jesus and less preoccupied or anxious about the details of life. More than an invitation to accept the details of God’s story as true or meaningful, surrendering means we give ourselves over to Christ and thereby become an integrated part of God’s great love story. Evangelism is strongest when a Christian is who he or she was created to be: a surrendered follower of Jesus. Share with the group one area of your life you might want to consider surrendering to God in order to abide more fully in Christ.”

“The second spiritual habit is Scripture study. Connecting with God through the discipline of studying the Bible helps Christ-followers to live lives more congruent with the Bible. God’s Spirit changes us through the words of Scripture and adds substance to the interconnecting stories of God and human beings. As we immerse ourselves in the Scriptures, God helps us make adjustments in the way we live life. We connect or abide with Jesus through God’s story every time we earnestly listen to and discover God’s word for us in the Bible. Since Scripture plays an important role in the eight small group sessions, we will leave the second spiritual habit of Scripture study to the ongoing work of our small group interaction.” To enable the group to wrestle with the Bible in

constructive ways, offer each participant the UCC article entitled, *The Bible and the United Church of Christ*.<sup>235</sup>

“The third habit combines silence and solitude. As habits or practices, these are difficult to separate from one another. While solitude can be defined as being alone with God, silence creates the opportunity to hear from God’s still small voice instead of filling life with noise. Intentional silence and solitude helps followers of Christ remove distractions for a brief period in order to practice abiding in Christ. Psalm 46:10 serves to guide a person who is interested in practicing the third spiritual discipline. “Be still, and know that I am God! I am exalted among the nations. I am exalted in the earth.” The goal of practicing silence and solitude is to set oneself apart in order to spend time alone with God, listening to God, and waiting on God. The Bible speaks often of Jesus setting himself apart to pray and engaging in the habits of solitude and silence. For example, Luke 5:16 says, “But Jesus often withdrew to lonely places and prayed.” We primarily learn silence and solitude by drawing away and quieting or stilling our minds, hearts, and bodies. While it is not complicated, it is a habit to be practiced.”

The next part will last twenty minutes. “The ‘Nooma: Noise,’<sup>236</sup> video clip we are about to watch contains segments of blackouts and moments when we simply read what is on the screen. Watch thoughtfully because, after the film, we will engage in an additional three minutes of complete silence before beginning a dialogue about the experience of silence and solitude. Many of us are unsettled by silence, but God is not.

---

<sup>235</sup>Writer’s Group 2008, Local Church Ministries, *The Bible and the United Church of Christ* (Cleveland: United Church Press, 2008).

<sup>236</sup>Rob Bell, *Noise*, no. 005 (Grand Rapids: Flannel and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 10-minute DVD, [www.Nooma.com](http://www.Nooma.com) (accessed March 19, 2010).

God longs to speak to us and does so as we intentionally listen and wait. Please do not talk until we begin the group conversation.” The conversation questions in the handouts should be used at the group’s discretion and as time allows.

The following summarizes the spiritual habits of silence and solitude. (This portion takes ten minutes.) The leader says, “Making and keeping an appointment with silence could be a wonderful, fresh start to knowing God more closely. Henri Nouwen writes about the importance of silence.”

Simplicity and regularity are the best guides in finding our way. They allow us to make the discipline of solitude as much a part of our daily lives as eating and sleeping. When that happens our noisy worries will slowly lose their power over us and the renewing activity of God’s Spirit will slowly make its presence known. ...what finally matters is that our hearts become like quiet cells where God can dwell, wherever we go and whatever we do.<sup>237</sup>

The leader continues, “It is truly a miracle that we are offered full partnership with Christ in reconciling people and creation back to God. Jesus desires to partner with us as gospel messengers, good news storytellers. Evangelism that does not flow out of a deepening attentiveness to God may do more damage than good. Keep in mind that human beings should not reduce life with God to a formula because, in truth, relating to God is full of mystery and faith. Our beginning point for considering evangelism is not perfection, but practice. While God’s story is life changing, what we really want to do is break through the story of God and actually meet Jesus Christ.”

“‘Apart from me you can do nothing.’ We are reminded that the branches have one job: stay connected to the vine. It is not for the branches to worry about producing fruit or what form the fruit takes, but to stay intimately connected to the vine. Spiritual

---

<sup>237</sup>Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishing, Inc., 1981), 79.

habits provide ways to practice abiding in Christ. In John 15:5 Jesus says, ‘I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.’ This passage reminds us that fruit is born only through abiding and resting in Christ. The connectedness between your story or my story, or our community’s story and God’s story results in fruit bearing. As we remain in God’s love, God’s life in us produces more of God’s life around us. It is that simple. Henri Nouwen contends that we must practice disciplines like silence and solitude in order to empty ourselves so that we have space to be more attentive to God’s voice.”

In order to practice abiding in Christ, the group is invited to schedule two more personal times of silence and solitude during the week ahead. (This portion should last twenty minutes in all.) Suggest that five to ten minutes serve as a good beginning point. Journaling during these times can be helpful. Reading slowly through John 15 or Psalm 46 is a good way to begin a time of silence and solitude.

### Ending Exercise

To end the third session, each participant is encouraged to ask one specific person in the group any question about abiding. Correct answers are not the goal, rather, the intended outcome of this experience is to invite group members to question openly and honestly where they are in the process of abiding in Christ. Sample questions are offered. The leader says, “Does a person have to trust and follow Jesus to practice abiding in Christ? How does abiding in Christ relate to evangelism? Since I still feel uncomfortable about evangelism, even though I appreciate what we did to abide in Christ, do I therefore not belong in a group like this? Praying is not easy for me; what other ways can I abide in



Christ? As a final reminder, the three habits we covered in order to abide in Christ more fully were surrender, Scripture study, and silence/solitude.”

“Abiding in Christ builds our confidence in sharing our faith by enabling us to embody the good news as we learn to share the good news. As our ending prayer, we will say together the words of prayer printed on the handouts. As our optional assignment for next week, please re-read the five marks of mission and prepare for a short discussion about each of them.”

#### **Small Group #4 Topic: Storytelling Skills in Luke 10:25-37**

##### **Introductory Activity**

The objective for this session is to hone storytelling skills as a way to put our faith into words. After reading the introductory material and praying, each participant is asked to share one part of last week that helped with abiding in Christ, e.g. share an experience you had practicing silence this past week or offer a comment or question about the five marks of mission (this should last for fifteen minutes).

The leader says, “We are beginning to learn a way-of-life approach to evangelism that requires an expansion of our understanding about faith sharing and the ‘unbinding of the good news that God adores us and everyone else, [and] that God has shown this to us through Jesus Christ.’<sup>238</sup> It is my hope that we will all be drawn to live ‘a more exciting life [of faith] with God and with each other.’”<sup>239</sup>

---

<sup>238</sup>Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel*, 3.

<sup>239</sup>Ibid.

### Leader's Script

The leader says, “Abiding in Christ provides a much needed relational ethic to how we understand evangelism. Sharing our faith begins by being close enough to God that we have something to share about our faith in Christ. We learn abiding by practicing spiritual disciplines and by watching and imitating Jesus in the ways he abided in God over the course of his earthly life. Jesus invested large amounts of time deepening his intimacy with God. This intention was so profoundly wrapped in his mission that closeness with God created the foundation for Christ to bring good news to the world. We are striving to be motivated by the same love that inspired and sustained Jesus.

To introduce storytelling in about ten minutes, the leader says, “G. K. Chesterton wrote of the importance of story in his book *Orthodoxy*. Would someone please read the quote?”

In short, I had always believed that the world involved magic. Now I thought that perhaps it involved a magician. And this pointed to a profound emotion always present and sub-conscious, that this world of ours has some purpose; and if there is a purpose, there is a person. I had always felt life first as a story, and if there is a story there is a story-teller.<sup>240</sup>

“What are your thoughts about this quote? We are beginning this week to learn to tell stories, our own and God’s stories. Story, conversation, and listening are biblical essentials that make up a respectful approach to evangelism. The task is challenging because twenty-first-century storytellers must learn “to tell our stories unselfconsciously and without a sense of preaching or performing, but rather, including our personal experiences of spirituality . . . [as well as our mistakes] and the ambivalences of our own

---

<sup>240</sup>G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; repr. New York: Random House, Inc., 2001), 59.

experience.”<sup>241</sup> Christian witness expressed as storytelling implies that the storyteller must have genuine, growing experiences with Jesus Christ. This evening we will practice experiencing a story of Jesus from Luke 10:25-37.”

“The following experience (approximately forty minutes) is designed to help followers of Christ learn ‘to engage creatively and christianly with the culture’<sup>242</sup> in which we live by fully engaging in a story from the life of Christ. Participation in the story involves the body, the heart, the will, and the voice. We begin by reading and hearing the story three times in an effort to imagine the story with our whole being. All aspects of the experience are integrated throughout the process. The desired outcome is to experience and talk about God, Jesus, and the Spirit in everyday, ordinary life through a specific story in the Bible.”

The facilitator coordinates the event. First, the participants are invited into the culture of the story in Luke 10 and into a personal and community experience of the story. The facilitator begins with a short explanation of the context out of which the text was written. The following serves as an example of what the facilitator might say to introduce the story and the culture within which Luke’s account took place: “Once again we discover Jesus in conversation, this time with a lawyer who specialized in Jewish religious law. Jesus used common language and an ordinary situation to talk about profound spiritual realities. In answering the lawyer’s question about who was his neighbor, Jesus told a parable: a simple, clear, non-historical, disarming story that invited the lawyer to participate in answering his own question. The forty-eight-hour timeframe,

---

<sup>241</sup>John Drane, *Celebrity Culture* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Rutherford House, 2005), 85-86.

<sup>242</sup>John Drane, *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith: The Future of the Church, Biblical and Missiological Essays for the New Century* (Cumbria, UK: Paternoster Press, 2000), ix.

told in a few short paragraphs, contains a cast of characters: a group of perpetrators, a victim, an unlikely hero, two religious professionals, a brief cameo appearance by a local innkeeper, the listening lawyer, and the storyteller, Jesus Christ.”

With Luke 10:25-37 in the hands of each participant from the small group handouts, the facilitator gently, slowly reads the passage, allowing for a quiet, reflective hearing of the story. Next, with their eyes closed, the participants listen to a second reading of the story; the facilitator/storyteller either re-tells the story from memory or reads the passage again. The participants/listeners are encouraged “to walk around in the story and try it on for size.”<sup>243</sup> For the third and final hearing of the text, the participants are asked to stand. By the end of the third reading, each participant is asked to make a decision about which character in the story they feel the most connection to. They are asked to move to a place in the room designated by a sign or an artistic representation symbolizing the person in the story with whom they connect most.<sup>244</sup> The storyteller facilitates a flexible, open discussion. The participants, now associated with one of three specific characters in the story, answer questions representing the actual person they choose from the story. They speak their responses in the first person, as the Samaritan, as the lawyer, or as the Priest/Levite.<sup>245</sup> The storyteller, having created a safe environment

---

<sup>243</sup>Richard A. Jensen, *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-literate Age* (Lima, Ohio: The C.S.S. Publishing Company, Inc., 1993), 93.

<sup>244</sup>Luke 10:25-37 contains at least nine characters, but it may be best to offer only three options for identifying with a person in the story: the Samaritan, the lawyer, the Priest/Levite.

<sup>245</sup>The dialogue is the key ingredient for calling people to participate in the story rather than simply listen to the story. The interaction must be experienced as a conversation between the storyteller and the representatives of the three story characters. One person at a time speaks in the place of the Samaritan, while the others who identify with the Samaritan as well as those identifying with the lawyer and the Priest/Levite listen carefully in order to identify with the Samaritan’s experience in the story. The conversation unfolds organically as the facilitator carefully draws each person into the conversation,

for the group, responds to the dialogue as a non-judgmental, outside observer. By the end of the experience, the facilitator will have earned the right to be heard as teacher for a few, brief, but wonderfully teachable moments.<sup>246</sup> In order to experience thoroughly Luke 10:27-36, full participation is required as opposed to simply hearing the story. Experiencing the stories of Jesus could be life-changing for the small group, as well as the people who may later encounter Christ through the group members, for example the men and women on their wish lists.

The following are some useful questions for engaging the story. The facilitator must be prepared to spontaneously add additional questions and interaction among the three characters. The following are listed in the handouts as the basis for the dialogue, which begins in the smaller groups, gathered around the signs, and continues with the entire small group together. “Speaking as the Samaritan, as the lawyer, or as the Priest/Levite in the story, what are you feeling? What are you thinking? How did you come to decide your particular course of action or non-action? Against whom do you have the most emotional reaction (anger, empathy, confusion, etc.) and why?”

Other questions not listed in the handouts could include the following. “For the Samaritan, why did you stop and help the traveler? For the Priest and the Levite, why did you not stop to give aid to the traveler? Why did you cross over to the other side of the street? For the lawyer, now that you have had the conversation with Jesus and have been invited to see the embodiment of mercy in a person whom you would have seen as

---

allowing space and time for their responses to the story and their responses to one another’s comments, questions, and observations.

<sup>246</sup>The role of storyteller/facilitator is best filled by an attentive listener, who is also a skilled asker of questions and a student of the Bible. The facilitator’s only agenda is that people encounter the living Christ in the word, in their own life experience, and in the process that unfolds among the small group community.

despicable, how has this experience re-oriented your understanding of neighbor? How has your understanding of God, of Jesus, and of yourself been altered?” The facilitator ends the Jesus story experience by asking the participants to self-reflect using their own voice, not that of characters in the story. The participants are invited to complete one sentence in one minute in the handouts.

(The next section should take fifteen minutes.) The leader says, “We hope the lawyer connected the parable to his own life, seeing the way of mercy, the way of love as the grounding spiritual principle of human life. To enable us to go deeper into the way of love, we turn now to 1 Corinthians 13. Would someone volunteer to read this passage? This kind of love is the chief motivator in Christian witness and the power behind the life and witness of Jesus Christ in the world. The lawyer challenged Jesus, who seemed to keep the point of the parable at a distance, not obvious or over simplified, therefore highlighting our stereotypical prejudices and pre-conceived notions about people who are different than us. He connected loving God to loving one’s neighbor in a simple story that began as a test against him. Ask the group to talk about what it would be like for followers of Christ to be filled to the fullness of love, the most excellent way of life described in 1 Corinthians 13?” After talking about 1 Corinthians 13, ask the group to get a partner, preferably someone with whom you have not yet had an in depth conversation. Take a few moments to have a conversation using some of the ending exercise questions listed in your handout and prepare to share your final answer with the whole group.

### Ending Exercise

The leader says, “Before we end this session, please pull out your wish lists or take a blank one. Are there other names you would like to add? If you have been

reminded of other family members, coworkers, friends who are near or far, even enemies, write their names down as well. (This ending exercise should take ten minutes.) After our experience of the conversation between the lawyer and Jesus, the next level wish list involves thinking more deeply about who in your life you sense God might be calling you to love with more patience and kindness; with less envy, arrogance, and rudeness; and with more empathy, hope, and endurance.”

Make a list. Who do you know who is not connected with a church or consciously connected to God? Don’t say anything to them! Just make your list. Now pray for them. Pray that if it’s right, you’ll have an opportunity to invite them to lunch, to write them a note... Pray for a chance to be with them. Pray that they will ask a question or start talking about deep things in their lives. Pray and keep your eyes open. The Spirit may nudge you...<sup>247</sup>

The leader continues, “As you prayerfully consider people for your wish list, stay focused on the reality that ‘relationships and community lie at the very heart of God. We Christians live in relationship: with God, with each other in the church, and with [other] people. . . .’<sup>248</sup> For next week, our optional assignment is to pray each day for the people on our wish lists and to consider what small things we can do today to help more people know God. ‘Evangelism is anything you do to help another person move closer to a relationship with God, or into Christian community.’<sup>249</sup> A second optional assignment is to read 1 John chapters 3, 4, and 5 every day as a way to present yourself openly to God’s Spirit. Do we have someone who would like to pray as we end our time together this evening?”

---

<sup>247</sup>Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel*, 186.

<sup>248</sup>*Ibid.*, 137.

<sup>249</sup>*Ibid.*, 9.

## Small Group #5 Topic: Storytelling Skills in Luke 19:1-10

### Introductory Activity

The leader starts this activity, which should last twenty minutes, saying, “As a bridge between this week’s story from Luke 19 and last week’s story from Luke 10 about the heroic Samaritan and the way of love that guides our search for respectful ways of sharing the good news, we will watch the following video about a form of evangelism quite unlike the approach we are learning.”

Following the film, the leader introduces a discussion using some of the following conversation questions intended to get at the heart of the video, *Bullhorn*.<sup>250</sup> Since the film serves as a connection between the two biblical passages, linger only long enough to draw out the group members’ responses to the film and to emphasize the way of love as the way of Jesus. “In your world, what are some general negative perceptions of Christianity that you have encountered? Are the negative perceptions of Christianity caused by what Christ-followers believe or by how they live? What can we do to change the negative perceptions? What draws you to the message of Jesus? What is distorted about the message that the ‘the bullhorn guy’ seems to tell? Do you think God loves people who believe differently than you? What part of the ‘bull horn guy’ is in you? The final line of the film is very much like the passage from 1 John 3-5 that some of you read for this week and summarizes the way of love. ‘So, may you see that how you love others is how you love God. That’s it. That’s the way of love. That’s the way of Jesus.’”

---

<sup>250</sup>Rob Bell, *Bullhorn*, film 009 (Grand Rapids: Flannel and Zondervan, 2005), 12 minutes, DVD, [www.Nooma.com](http://www.Nooma.com) (accessed March 19, 2010).



### Leader's Script

[Tonight, an extra activity (approximately ten minutes) is available if time allows and the facilitator feels that the group needs something more. What follows is a short reflection on our own relationships with God. Instruct the group to read silently the UCC booklet, *16 Reasons I Love God*. Add a seventeenth reason for why they each love God or offer one of the original sixteen that resonated with them. The facilitator can choose to begin by reading the introductory material and offering a short opening prayer.]

The leaders starts five-minute portion: “Session 5 is designed to enhance our storytelling skills. On your handouts for small group #5, find the Bible passage for today, Luke 19:1-10. Would someone please read the story aloud? For the purpose of discovering a way of life that supports simple, ordinary, authentic Christian witness, the relationship between Jesus Christ and Zacchaeus is informative. The life of Zacchaeus was transformed by a visit with Jesus that resulted in a joyful, radical response to Jesus as Jesus embraced the tax collector. More accustomed to well-deserved rejection, Zacchaeus was a man who cheated the poor, damaged the weak, and dishonored God, yet Jesus wanted to spend time with him in his home. The next activity is intended to help us understand this story and the implications for our lives.”

The next part should take about thirty-five minutes. The leader says, “Choose a partner to work alongside you. Each of you choose two questions randomly from the container and discuss them together in preparation for a full group conversation. Each pair of people has four questions, with the probability that time will allow for only two to be addressed. After a few moments of talking with your partner, each pair reads one of their questions and offers a possible answer or assigns a different pair of people to answer

the question. We will go around the circle at least twice, and each pair of people may assign someone else to answer only one question. We are making observations about the story and trying to tie the story back to our own lives and the life of our group and our church; this is not a test of faith or of biblical knowledge.” The facilitator cuts the questions from below into small pieces of paper, and folds and places them in a container so the participants can make random selections. For a group of 8-11 members, two of each question must be in the container.

1. Why were the people grumbling about this visit?
2. What evidence is seen of change in Zacchaeus’ life?
3. What evidence of change (or perhaps pre-evidence) is seen in Jericho?
4. How had “salvation come to this house?”
5. Use your imagination to describe what “Son of Abraham” might mean.
6. Use your imagination to describe what “Son of Man” might mean.
7. Make observations about the ways Zacchaeus appears to be seeking or curious.
8. What might it mean, in a passage about a human being seeking (or being curious about Jesus), that Jesus Christ is actually the seeker?
9. Can you think of other instances where God is the seeker?
10. What evidence do you see that Zacchaeus experienced transformation before Jesus did anything other than invite himself into the home of Zacchaeus?
11. Jesus says very little in this story and yet his presence instigated significant transformation in one person’s life and, consequently, in the life of the community. How did this change occur? What is the connection back to Jesus?

The leader continues (for about ten minutes), “In order to reveal God’s love for all people and for all creation, and to offer meaning, forgiveness, purpose, peace, salvation, joy, hope, eternal, and abundant life, God seeks people. The purpose of God’s seeking is

not punishment, it is the good news that God adores us, God adores everyone, God adores creation, and God shows this love most clearly in Jesus Christ. The good news that God lovingly seeks human beings is the gospel we hope to share. God is also presented as the one seeking us in the Old Testament as well. Read silently Ezekiel 34:11-16, found in your handouts, and reflect silently on one impression you gain about God or about the good news.”

The next part should take fifteen minutes. The leader says, “God often seeks people through average Christ-followers by revealing in us who God is and how much God loves people. God usually does this work in the midst of our everyday, ordinary relationships. In order to hone storytelling skills with respect to sharing our faith, we will each take one minute to reflect on the story of Zacchaeus. Based on what you already believe about God and based on tonight’s story, you are invited to speak a piece of good news specifically offered to your conversation partner. Once you have each finished, pray briefly for one another’s wish list person.”

### Ending Exercise

The leader says, “For the closing prayer (approximately 5 minutes), we will say aloud a modified version of the ancient Jesus Prayer, “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us.” The facilitator says the prayer alone, aloud, followed by each of the participants adding their own voice to the prayer one at a time around the circle so that the end result is a recitation of the prayer aloud together.

“For next week, bring with you to the group three items representing important spiritual aspects of yourself.” The leader provides examples such as a rock from a

mission trip in Haiti, a photo of a loving grandparent who prayed for him or her regularly, or a cross or rosary that holds special meaning.

### **Small Group #6 Topic: Storytelling Skills in John 3, 7, and 19**

#### **Introductory Activity**

The leader starts with, “Tonight, the sixth session (twenty-five minutes) begins with a short unison prayer we pray aloud from the handouts and a quick reminder of the introductory material. In order to continue to learn to share our faith using words, this is the final session that focuses on honing storytelling skills and begins by each person describing one of the personal, spiritual, representative items they brought.”

The small group leader carefully monitors the time and begins the storytelling that continues around the circle one item at a time, until everyone has shared at least one of their three items. The facilitator reminds the group during the exercise that we are practicing sharing our faith, while we also practice listening attentively. “We are concentrating on being conscious of how we feel and what we think as we share portions of our faith story and as we listen to the spiritual stories of others. I encourage you to consider if and how your confidence for putting your faith into words is growing as well as whether you notice the confidence of the other participants growing. I recommend also that you consider whether what you share tonight would sound any different if someone who is not currently in our circle were to hear your story, someone on your wish list, for example.”

### Leader's Script

The leader starts this material (about fifty minutes of discussion) by saying, “The passages comprising the story of Nicodemus come exclusively from the Gospel of John. Who would like to read these three texts? As we hear the passages read aloud from the handouts, make a few observations about the Pharisee named Nicodemus, how he may have changed over the years, and how his own story connected to the story of Jesus. You may use your handouts to write down reminders of what you notice, paying special attention to his possibly changing perceptions about Jesus Christ. After hearing the story, we will split into groups of two or three in order to draft a storyboard that constructs an abbreviated version of the story. Storyboarding is frequently used by filmmakers and others who tell stories creatively. The use of storyboarding enables storytellers to think broadly about what they want to say and how they might articulate the story. You are about to reshape, rediscover, and retell the story of Nicodemus in a fresh way, unique to you and your storyboarding partners.”

The facilitator provides white boards and markers, or large pieces of paper and crayons so that each group can construct their own storyboard of the life of Nicodemus. The facilitator also offers input primarily by asking questions related to the texts and to the possibility of relationship between Jesus and Nicodemus. The facilitator helps to keep the group focused on the big story of the life of Nicodemus and how he related to Jesus over time. Adding to the conversation when the group seems stuck, the leader offers observations about the role Nicodemus played in the unfolding drama of the gospel of John as well as drawing the participants' attention to the growing attachment forged over time between Jesus and Nicodemus.

After each of the groups has almost completed their storyboard, the facilitator interrupts the process with the following information and additional experience for the story boarding activity. “Jesus had no expectation of a step-by-step, pre-determined process of change when people encountered him. For Nicodemus, and perhaps for some of us, attachment develops first at a cerebral level and may include criticism, curiosity, or intellectual interest. Our stories morph over time as we open ourselves up to the possibility of finding faith. Nicodemus moved toward Christ when he differed with his contemporaries on the manner in which Jesus was being treated by the religious authorities. Later, his relationship with Jesus progressed into a change of heart evidenced by his compassionate and sacrificial service with Joseph of Arimathea at the cross. The Bible affirms the process of conversion as progressive change that makes its way in its own time toward transformation. Evidence exists to substantiate the conversion of Nicodemus, and experiencing him in the biblical story opens the door to new conversations about conversion, transformation, and Christian witness.”

The facilitator asks each group to add more to their picture using a different colored pen or crayon they have not yet used. Each participant is asked to insert herself or himself into the story of Nicodemus by drawing themselves into the story. After a few moments, the leader asks each person to share with the people in their group how they are like Nicodemus or how they are unlike him. The groups will each have a few moments to tell the story from their storyboard at the end of this activity. The leader concludes with: “We have inserted ourselves into the story and we have honed our storytelling skills through the images drawn in our story boards and the words we employed to describe the story.”

[An optional activity follows that requires twenty to thirty minutes. “Learning to tell your story of faith can come through various forms of art and media. We are about to consider what it would be like to actually insert oneself physically into the story of God. To increase our ability to tell our own stories, the art of Michelangelo is helpful because he inserted himself into the good news story. Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni (1475-1564) was one of the most accomplished sculptors in the history of art, and he powerfully influenced western art for more than six centuries. Look carefully at this unfinished, broken *Pietà*, which was sculpted in the second half of the artist’s life between 1547 and 1555, following his conversion to Christ. Michelangelo spent most of his life rejecting Christ and the Church, until a late-in-life conversion. His intimate identification with Jesus is witnessed through the character of Nicodemus in this rendition of the *Pietà* in the Museum of the Opera del Duomo in Florence, Italy. Display the photographs on a screen using a computer and projector. This version of his *Pietà* stands seven feet eight inches tall.<sup>251</sup> After reflecting on the photos of this masterpiece, please read the brief summary in your handouts and discuss the sculpture with a partner, using the handout questions or your own.”]

In the next portion, which should take five minutes, the leader says, “Learning to tell our stories of faith, as well as the stories of faith in the Bible, is critical as our abiding relationship with Christ develops. Tonight, we re-imagined a familiar Bible story, taking the time to reframe and retell it with fresh vision. We, like Nicodemus learn to find ourselves in the story of God; we learn to tell our stories of faith. Next week we will look

---

<sup>251</sup>Lauren Mitchell Ruehring, photographs of “Michelangelo Sculptures,” <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/michelangelo-sculptures21.htm> (accessed November 23, 2009).

closely at a current, twenty-first-century way of telling spiritual stories. To prepare for next week, we review simple storytelling skills modeled by average people in Alcoholics Anonymous® (AA).”<sup>252</sup>

“AA is a voluntary fellowship of more than 2,000,000 extraordinary men and women from all walks of life who meet together in more than 114,000 groups around the world to attain and maintain sobriety. AA members learn to tell their stories, what they refer to as “telling your story, or giving your lead,”<sup>253</sup> by observing the ways that other members tell their stories, in various settings, such as small groups, formal meetings, conferences, and retreats, designed to support recovery from alcoholism. AA members follow an uncomplicated pattern of describing what they used to be like prior to getting help from AA when alcohol controlled their life. Their storytelling process represents one way to tell one’s story of faith and includes honestly recounting what happened to them, sometimes referred to as an initial moment of grace. Finally, their storytelling includes explaining what they are like in the present moment. Respect and dignity are offered to all who find their way to AA, allowing people the freedom to embody their present state of being and move forward as they are ready.”

### Ending Exercise

The leader says (in a concluding section of about ten minutes), “To end our evening together, we will review together the AA storytelling model. For our closing

---

<sup>252</sup>All information obtained from the Alcoholics Anonymous® website <http://www.aa.org/lang/en/subpage.cfm> (accessed March 19, 2010).

<sup>253</sup>“Your First AA Meeting: Types of Meetings, Speaker Meetings,” [http://www.bma-wellness.com/papers/First\\_AA\\_Meeting.html#Types of AA Meetings](http://www.bma-wellness.com/papers/First_AA_Meeting.html#Types%20of%20AA%20Meetings) (accessed March 19, 2010), and “A.A. at a Glance,” [http://www.aa.org/pdf/products/f-1\\_AAataGlance1.pdf](http://www.aa.org/pdf/products/f-1_AAataGlance1.pdf) (accessed March 19, 2010).



prayer, would one or two members offer short prayers to God aloud on behalf of all of us? The assignment for next week invites you to tell your story of faith as you understand it today, following loosely the AA pattern outlined in the handouts or using the pattern we established tonight of reflecting on a physical item that helps us share a portion of our story.”

### **Small Group #7 Topic: Welcoming Skills: Witness, Poverty, and Conversion in Mark 10:46-62**

#### **Introductory Activity**

The leader starts by saying, “Tonight, the seventh session begins with a review of the introductory material/kernel and a prayer from a volunteer (5 minutes). The topic is welcoming as witness, and the focus is learning to live a radically generous life as an expression of the good news. We approach the three activities of this session with the awareness that all human beings are in need of conversion, not just those who experience poverty, or those in need of healing.

#### **Leader’s Script**

The leader begins this portion (approximately twenty-five minutes) by saying, “The first of three activities for the session is the optional assignment from last week, inviting each of us to tell a portion of our story of faith, modeled loosely after the Alcoholics Anonymous®<sup>254</sup> storytelling pattern or modeled after the way we shared portions of our faith stories using a physical item from our lives to talk about our faith. To begin this exercise, we listen to a version of Bartimaeus’ encounter with Christ

---

<sup>254</sup> All information obtained from the Alcoholics Anonymous® website.

following the AA model, after which a few of us have the opportunity to offer our stories. If you do not feel comfortable telling us your faith story right now, you might consider telling it next week. Listen as others recount their journeys of faith, beginning with a simple paraphrase of the story of Bartimaeus.” After the stories have been shared, including the paraphrase of Bartimaeus below, the leader offers thanks to everyone who took the risk of sharing a piece of their heart with the group.

My name is Bartimaeus and I used to be blind. Prior to being connected to Jesus, I spent my whole life begging for food and clothing on the streets in order to survive. I was blind from as far back into my childhood as I can remember. My parents did their best with me, but, when they died, I had nowhere to go and no one to turn to. I experienced a moment of life-changing, converting grace when Jesus came to Jericho for the first time. Everyone and their brother wanted to see Jesus because we’d heard so much about him and our town was full of poor people. I, however, was desperate beyond belief. When I heard the crowd coming I lost any sense of dignity that was left in my weary life and I ran. Arms flailing, legs falling out from under me, I ran right up to him, stumbling and yelling and doing what I did best, the only thing I really knew: I begged him for mercy!

Since everyone else in town wanted to hear what he had to say, people did not appreciate that I was hogging all his time. Jesus didn’t seem to mind. In fact, he stopped and ordered them to bring me to him. His first words to me were the kindest words I’d ever heard, and I remember what he said like it was just yesterday. “What do you want me to do for you?” I about fell over from joy. My once useless eyes poured out tears of joy because he healed me. I was blind and now I can see! So I started following him, like all of his other friends seemed to be doing. Finding faith in Jesus and following Jesus began at that moment, but it was barely the beginning. I had no idea where we were going; I didn’t care, because I just wanted, actually I needed, to be with him. And he took me in as one of his own, all the way to the place where he died. At the time I was clueless about why he let them kill him. It was awful at first, but now I understand that was part of how he healed me.

The leader continues, “The second activity (approximately ten minutes) for this session begins with a brief explanation of the text and a few important definitions to help us make progress in witnessing to the life and love of Christ by learning welcoming skills. Small group tonight teaches us to cross economic, social, religious, and political

barriers in order to understand and share the whole gospel. We direct our attention to aligning ourselves more thoroughly with the good news Jesus Christ brings to the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast. Honing our welcoming skills in order to share our faith is tonight's objective. For us to become people who embody the gospel, we learn to go to Jericho, to Samaria, and to the poor. Being in relationship with people who are different from us changes us and our experience of God."

"The good news is demonstrated by the way we live. The gospel travels along relational road; it moves forward in the world over relational bridges. Our churches may need to better concentrate on the cross and the life of Jesus Christ as well as his teachings about a gospel intending to transform the whole earth. More than an announcement, the gospel is God's dream for a recreated, reconciled world. To make God's dream a reality, God wants to use us as the welcoming agents who actively invite the poor into our communities of worship. Redeeming poverty, illness, and homelessness is part of the gospel story. The story of Bartimaeus is instructive."

"Who would like to read the Bible's account of Bartimaeus and Jesus? In order to see the story through the eyes of the blind, begging son of Timaeus, we notice that Bartimaeus cried out to Jesus for mercy twice in the midst of the scolding crowd. As an expression of young faith, he eagerly called out to this Son of David, identifying Jesus as a possible emissary from God, someone with power, who also could be trusted. He received mercy from God through healing and, as his eyes were restored, spiritual sight was offered to him as well."

"The presence and healing touch of Jesus transformed and converted the once blind man. He received physical and spiritual healing, whereby a new life-long journey of

following Jesus was initiated in the process of being converted. Bartimaeus' enthusiastic response of trust in Christ represented evidence of genuine faith and conversion to God. Additionally, his immediate choice to follow Christ further substantiated an authentic, initial reaction of faith. More awaited him ahead beyond the restoration of his sight as the road with Jesus led to the cross and beyond. Bartimaeus had yet to understand and trust Christ in Christ's coming death and resurrection. He had not yet fully believed, but he had been converted into the life and love of God."

"The encounter between Jesus and Bartimaeus informs the definitions of five key concepts guiding tonight's conversation about sharing our faith among the poor. Which five of us will read aloud the five key concepts? Conversion is first. Poverty is second. In light of Bartimaeus, poor because of a physical handicap, and in light of the poverty on the planet, our hope tonight is to learn from Christ how to live radically generous lives as one expression of welcome. Because the causes of poverty are complicated and beyond the scope of our work together, we will not focus our attention on why poverty exists, but rather on how our lives can impact people who live in poverty. Third is welcoming. Fourth is inviting. Fifth is healing."

The last portion should take fifteen minutes. The leader says, "To develop further insights from the relationship between Jesus and Bartimaeus, find a partner and discuss one of the first three conversation questions in the handouts." Each pair of participants chooses one of the three questions and, at the end of the allotted time, shares a highlight from their conversation. Overlap may occur between pairs, but the leader makes certain that every question is addressed and reported back to the group. [Question four is optional and to be used if time allows or if the group would benefit from further biblical

interaction about the topic of poverty and the way of love. To address James 2:1-13 requires at least thirty to forty-five additional minutes.]

### Ending Exercise

The leader begins the exercise by saying, “The ending exercise (approximately twenty-five minutes) introduces us to St. Francis of Assisi. One of the most famous Christian saints, Francis is often referred to as the patron saint of environmentalists, animal lovers, and the poor. A contemplative, an activist, and an evangelist, his understanding of the gospel as an integrated, holistic message of good news for everyone included a strong commitment to social justice, ecological justice, and personal holiness. During one of the most corrupt times in the history of the Church, near the end of the Dark Ages in the thirteenth century, St. Francis served among the poor and chose a life of homelessness and poverty. He established a clear and simple purpose: ‘to mingle with the world without becoming entangled with the world [and to] stir up the world to a new spiritual enthusiasm.’<sup>255</sup> It has been reported that ‘Francis did not love humanity, but [individual people] so he did not love Christianity, but Christ.’<sup>256</sup> To express God’s love, he lived a way of life marked by radical identification with the poor. The life of Francis teaches us that ‘if we spent less time worrying about how to share our faith...and more time thinking about how to live radically generous lives, more people would start taking our message seriously.’”<sup>257</sup>

---

<sup>255</sup>G. K. Chesterton, *St. Francis of Assisi* (New York: Image, Doubleday, Random House, Inc., 1924, 1951, 2001), 93-94.

<sup>256</sup>*Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>257</sup>Ian Morgan Cron, *Chasing Francis: A Novel* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2006), 195.

“The clip from *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, the 1973 Academy Award nominated film by Franco Zeffirelli and Lina Wertmuller ‘focuses on the early years of Francis of Assisi, who sought communion with the natural world by renouncing his family’s riches . . . left a life of comfort to seek a spiritual union with the world.’<sup>258</sup> The scene we are about to watch occurs mid-way through the movie while Francis (Francesco) and two of his life-long friends, Bernardo, and later Giocondo, who are slowly being converted to Christ, are working to rebuild the church at San Damiano. The lawyer Paolo, also a friend of Francesco, sends Giocando and Sylvestro to bring back Bernardo, an ex-war hero who has been summoned to speak to the emperor and the governor. After watching the film clip, we will discuss together as a group the conversation questions from your handouts.”

[Optional Activity: If the group shows interest, the facilitator should ask the group if they would like to watch the final two scenes of the film, #12 and #13, which last about fifteen minutes, and then identify further connections between witnessing and welcoming.]

Before ending the session (another ten minutes), the facilitator invites the group to do a self-reflection exercise by completing the sentence in the handouts: “As an expression of the connection between living a radically generous life and how I share my faith, I intend to adapt my life in the following way(s)...For next week’s optional assignments, please watch the movie *Amistad*,<sup>259</sup> by Steven Spielberg. Would you like to take some time and watch the film together as a group? Please also prepare to share your faith story, using the abbreviated AA model or an item representing your journey and bring your updated wish lists to our final meeting.

---

<sup>258</sup>Franco Zeffirelli, *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* (Los Angeles: Paramount Pictures, 1973), starring Grahm Faulkner, from the video and DVD cover.

<sup>259</sup> Steven Spielberg, *Amistad* (Universal City, CA: DreamWorks Pictures in association with HBO Pictures, 1999), DVD.

“For our closing prayer we read silently at the end of the handouts in order to determine if we feel comfortable praying this prayer aloud. Together we will now pray the closing prayer. Consider also praying this prayer every day as a spiritual discipline over the next week. ‘Lord of love, I’ve spent far too much time talking about love and not enough time loving my difficult and different neighbors. Open my eyes to my neighbors and get me moving, by your Spirit, to love them. In Jesus, whose cross teaches me love each day. Amen.’”<sup>260</sup>

### **Small Group #8 Topic: Welcoming Skills: Witness and Care for Society’s Marginalized in Luke 17:11-19**

#### **Introductory Activity**

The leader introduces the final session (five minutes) with a reminder of the kernel out of which we shared the eight sessions, “As for the five marks of mission, our group’s understanding of them has morphed dramatically, and we read them aloud together tonight as an expression of our broad understanding of sharing our faith in Christ. The topic is welcoming practiced as witness and care for society’s marginalized. The focus is inviting those who are marginalized into the community of the local church. As we hone our welcoming skills, this small group points us toward intentional acts of kindness.”

[An optional twenty- to thirty-minute activity, using a film clip from *Amistad*,<sup>261</sup> will be useful for some groups that have extra time to invest in the process of learning to

---

<sup>260</sup>Eugene H. Peterson, and Peter Santucci, *Tell It Slant Study Guide* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 10.

<sup>261</sup>Spielberg, *Amistad*, DVD, scene #13, in the middle starting with the prison scene where the Africans are reading a picture Bible and ending after the prisoner sees the ship masts that look like crosses.

share their faith. Steven Spielberg expressed the simple high points of the gospel in a surprisingly clear way. Based on a true story, the movie chronicles the incredible journey of a group of enslaved Africans on a quest for freedom. When their ship, *La Amistad*, is seized, the captives are brought to the United States, where they are charged with murder for killing their captors. As they await their fate in prison, an enthralling battle captures the entire nation, confronting the very foundation of the justice system. For the men and women on trial, it is simply the fight for freedom, a basic human right. The judge, who has the task of determining the final fate of the accused Africans, is a Catholic Christian, whom the viewer sees in church praying while the Africans are in prison waiting his final judgment of them. The scene occurs in the prison where one of the Africans has obtained a picture Bible and shares some of God's story with a fellow prisoner.

The leader comments, "Some of the most marginalized, mistreated people in the history of the United States, enslaved Africans, by Spielberg's account, seem to have discovered the love of God in Christ. What do you see that reflects gospel or good news in the film? How does Spielberg portray the high points of the good news story in the midst of an otherwise hopeless report of an unfairly outcast people? How did the one African prisoner, and perhaps others with whom he spoke, feel the nearness of God in the middle of their suffering and uncertainty? How do you see the story of the gospel in this film? What are some of the high points of the good news that can be noticed in the movie?" Offer a couple of your responses to the clip before moving on. Be sure to point out the imagery of the crosses throughout the scene. The leader says, "To what might these men and women be converted?"]



The leader continues with the next portion (about twenty-five minutes), “The storytelling assignment from the past two weeks invites each of us to tell a portion of our story of faith in one of two ways: either modeled loosely after the AA storytelling pattern or using a physical item to share a portion of our faith journeys. Who would like to tell their story tonight?” The facilitator leads a process of storytelling that is absent of any pressure to perform, and encourages people to share what is comfortable for them to share. The modified AA outline is written on the white board. The leader then says, “As we end our storytelling practice with a prayer taken from a poem attributed to St. Patrick, spend one moment reading it silently, and then we will recite the prayer together with the call and answer format outlined in the handouts.”

In the next section (ten minutes), the leader says, “To introduce Jesus in relationship with yet another severely marginalized person, consider how Walter Brueggemann assesses the teachings and healings in Jesus’ ministry when he writes, ‘It was one thing to eat with outcasts (society’s marginalized), but it was far more radical to announce that the distinctions between insiders and outsiders were null and void.’<sup>262</sup> Of the stories from the life of Jesus that we have read and others of which you are familiar, can you recall specifically who was an outcast person? Why do those people fall within the category of society’s marginalized? Who would you consider marginalized today and why?”

The leader continues in the next portion (approximately thirty minutes) by saying, “The context of Luke 17:11-19 is important. Seeing the story through the eyes of the main character, another dishonorable, despised Samaritan, helps us make progress toward

---

<sup>262</sup>Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Image*, 109.

a new way of sharing our faith in Christ. We find Jesus extending kindness and compassionate mercy to a foreigner who is an infected, infectious leper. The story begins with ten outcasts, nine Jews and one Samaritan, standing at a distance asking for help from Jesus. Jesus pauses on his journey toward Jerusalem, and the waiting cross, to heal all of them and to have a conversation with the one who turned back and gave thanks to Jesus as though Jesus were God. This is the only incident in the New Testament where thanks was directed back to Jesus instead of offered to God. The unlikely response of this stranger implies belief in the uniqueness of Jesus Christ. Jesus connects the Samaritan leper's faith to his being healed and we watch as the leper's gratitude becomes a demonstration of his faith. Jesus' life is characterized by dramatic, uncompromising, inclusion and kindness."

"Before we consider the gospel's radical call to us, we read Luke 17:11-19 three times: aloud together, aloud by a volunteer, and silently alone. During the silent reading, we stand up for the following conversation. As a group we answer questions concerning the nine healed lepers and then discuss, with partners, questions related to the one who turned back. Near the end of the allotted time, we share a highlight from our conversations. The leprous Samaritan, who experienced initial faith in God and a welcome inclusion from Jesus, was converted and found new life in Christ. How can we invite marginalized people into our communities? Why should we? Why is this difficult?

The leader continues for about five minutes. "Conversion is a beginning point, a turning around. One of the goals of the spiritual journey is transformation. 'Christian transformation never settles for cosmetic adjustments. It involves being reborn, remade

into who we were destined from eternity to be.’<sup>263</sup> Jesus used a variety of real life illustrations to refer frequently to the first step in the journey of conversion. He encouraged certain people to repent of their sins. He often invited people to follow him and sometimes he simply asked people to allow him to heal them. In every instance, the people with whom Jesus related demonstrated that Christian conversion is the beginning of ‘much more than a mere change of the externals of life, it is the refashioning of our entire beings.’<sup>264</sup> Conversion can also be described as intentionally bringing more and more of ourselves to God and surrendering to the love found in Jesus Christ, a love that is the most ‘absolutely unconditional divine love imaginable.’<sup>265</sup>

### Ending Exercise

The leader concludes by saying, “Our final ending exercise (about ten minutes) alerts us to the kindness of God in our stories of faith. We can learn a great deal from a group of ancient Christians, the Celts, who lived around the year 432. Similar to the Celtic way of evangelism led by St. Patrick, we are hoping for the conversion of people, but, like St. Patrick we remain flexible, kind, and respectful in our approach to welcoming people toward the love of God. The Celtic Christians lived their faith in such a way as to model for us a welcoming style of evangelism. ‘All guests . . . are to be welcomed as Christ, for he himself will say: “I was a stranger and you welcomed

---

<sup>263</sup>David G. Benner, *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 72.

<sup>264</sup>*Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>265</sup>*Ibid.*, 84.

me.”<sup>266</sup> The Celts lived in communities of love and service, engaged people through conversation, invited them into the process of finding faith in Christ, ‘preferred inclusion rather than exclusion. . . [and were] a fairly religious-friendly movement.’<sup>267</sup> From the Celtic ways, we learn to take time to understand those outside the Church and extend kindness to them.”

“In the Bible, Romans 2:8 says, ‘God’s kindness leads to repentance.’ Kindness may very well be one of the keys to twenty-first-century evangelism efforts, just as the kindness of God toward all human beings is often the key to repentance. Jesus’ approach with Bartimaeus, with the famous Samaritan woman at the well, with the Samaritan leper, with Zacchaeus, with the lawyer who needed a lesson in love, and with Nicodemus, was grounded in kindness. The kindness of Jesus Christ that leads to repentance and conversion comes in many forms, including healing, welcoming love, forgiveness, a home visit, and patience in the development of a variety of relationships. God invites us also to extend kindness as an expression of God’s welcome.”

“I have heard stories of people who long to share their faith in words, but do not quite know how, so they proceed in the way of love and kindness. For example, I read a story about someone who retrieves his neighbor’s garbage cans every time he brings in his own. I know of people who find ways to extend love and kindness to neighbors, co-workers, friends, family members, and even to their enemies. My own family is often eager to pick up hitchhikers any time we see them on the road. In all of these and many

---

<sup>266</sup>Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 52.

<sup>267</sup>Hunter, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 93.

other expressions of ‘a conspiracy of kindness,’<sup>268</sup> followers of Christ extend the love of God by living their life the way Jesus lived his life.”

In this last ten-minute segment, the leader says: “Pull out your wish lists one last time and consider two ideas to take with you as you continue to discover how to share your faith. First, you can practice kindness with the people whose names you wrote down. Second, you can pray for the people on your lists and for yourself. Pray that storytelling opportunities would come to life and that you might have the courage to speak some of the details of your story of faith when the time is right. Pray they would be open and receptive to the love of God lived out right in front of them by you. Refer back to the introductory material and then complete the final self-reflection exercise in the handouts and share your answers. Our closing prayer together focuses on the good news mission of Jesus and of us. We conclude by praying aloud together a paraphrase of Luke 4:18-19 found in our handouts.”

---

<sup>268</sup>Steve Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness: A Refreshing New Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus with Others* (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1993).

## CHAPTER 7

### EVALUATION AND ADAPTATION

Chapter 7 documents the implementation of the eight-week, small group field test from chapter 6 and evaluates the material designed for learning a way of life approach to evangelism at Sixth Avenue UCC. The strategy was intended to cast vision for the UCC's movement into the future, re-imagined as Christian communities for holistic witness in the world. Using the results of the evaluation, chapter 7 also proposes adaptations to the strategy for future use in other Metro Denver Association UCC churches. The possibility of trans-denominational implementation is also offered.

#### **Documentation of the Small Group Test Case**

The test case was delivered through eight small group sessions for Sixth Avenue UCC in the winter of 2010 between January 25 and March 15. One year prior to the implementation, during January 2009, the writer and Pastor Dan Geslin decided to apply the strategy using the small group format within the community at Sixth Avenue. The participants formed an eclectic group normative of the variety of people who identify with the UCC. A wide diversity of theological beliefs, spiritual opinions, and encounters with evangelism practices played a significant role in the unfolding story of the test case. The pastor's input and contributions ended during the summer of 2009 following the

initial contextual work exploring the history and background of the denomination and the local church. The test case proceeded with ten enthusiastic lay people from Sixth Avenue, accompanied by the blessing of the pastor offered the previous year.

Three couples and four individuals, who were either single or who had a spouse not attending the sessions, made up the group of ten loyal participants. Of the ten, five participants were members of Sixth Avenue and five were visitors who had not joined the church. Together, the ten comprised more than 10 percent of the average weekly attendance at Sixth Avenue's Sunday worship service. The attendees, five women and five men ranging in age from forty-four to fifty-one, had all earned a minimum of a bachelor's degree. The group members included a female, twenty-year member of Sixth Avenue, who is a neurologist, marathon runner, and mother to a spiritually eager five-year-old daughter. One of the men, a recent college graduate developing a new career and seeking employment, presented himself as an introverted, conservative evangelical. Another male identified himself as recovering from evangelicalism. Another female, mother to two energetic girls, whose husband did not attend the group, self-identified as post or anti-evangelical and currently is divesting of much of the evangelical faith she experienced during the first half of her life. Two of the three couples have been members at Sixth Avenue for almost two years, and the third couple, two males with faith stories originating out of the evangelical tradition, reported suffering rejection and oppression in their past church experiences.

The “Initial Program Inquiry”<sup>269</sup> (IPI) uncovered relevant past experiences and biases that were used to adapt the material throughout the field test. The profound diversity within the group revealed widely disparate spiritual histories. Each member categorized their experiences prior to January 24, 2010, by answering a short set of questions on a scale of one to ten. “Ten” represented a response related to frequency as “very often” and “one” represented a response of “never.” The IPI survey questions were divided into three segments. The first area of inquiry centered on the frequency of talking about one’s spiritual life or one’s journey of faith with various groups of people including co-workers, friends, neighbors, families of origin, and current family systems. In this area, the group represented itself as talking about their faith journeys with an average frequency level. The second area inquired about levels of comfort in listening, conversing, and prayer associated with the stories of faith of people in their lives. Using the same scale descriptors, the group identified its level of comfort in listening, conversation, and prayer as slightly higher than middle on the scale.

The most illuminating result from the IPI came out of the third area of inquiry. This segment asked participants to describe themselves when reflecting on intimidating or negative concepts associated with witnessing, evangelism, or sharing their faith. They were asked to choose between five phrases: “not at all,” “just a little,” “somewhat,” “very,” or “extremely.” The three people who indicated feeling “somewhat” intimidated identified as evangelical or currently in recovery from evangelicalism. Of the five who

---

<sup>269</sup>The Initial Program Inquiry (IPI) (Appendix A) was a ten-question survey intended to establish a base-line of information for the small group experience. The IPI also provided raw data about the faith sharing experiences and feelings associated with evangelism for the participants. This and other questionnaires were used to evaluate the material and create proposals for appropriate future adaptations of the material.



chose the descriptor “very,” three were UCC members at Sixth Avenue, and two were moving away from evangelicalism, but were not distinctly against evangelicalism. The one person who selected “extremely” negative came from an evangelical background, and self-described as beyond post-evangelical or anti-evangelical. Only one participant depicted herself as less negative when making personal association with witnessing, evangelism, and faith sharing.

The multiplicity of theological views and emotional responses to faith development, biblical fluency, and experiences with evangelism made for lively discussion and more than a few distractions to the learning process. The overall diversity lined up well with the UCC and particularly with the people of Sixth Avenue, affording a small, but authentic field test of the material on behalf of the UCC. The diversity surfaced, for example, in sincere questions and concerns about the divinity of Christ; the necessity, or not, for Christ-followers to share their faith stories; and the potential arrogance of claiming good news that others might not have heard. The diversity of group members’ knowledge related to Bible, culture, and politics emerged almost every week. One major distraction from the work of learning a new approach to evangelism occurred during week five. The distraction eventually played a formative role in defining the gospel the group agreed to share. While examining the UCC resource, *16 Reasons I Love God*, extended discussion ensued concerning how uninformed the UCC presents itself by including number nine, “One word: chocolate”<sup>270</sup> as a reason to love God. “Since the people who pick cocoa beans,” one well informed group member argued, “are often enslaved, impoverished, starving children in developing nations who actually never have

---

<sup>270</sup>Quinn G. Caldwell, *16 Reasons I Love God* (Cleveland: The Congregational Vitality of Local Church Ministries of the UCC, 2008), #9.

the privilege of eating a chocolate bar, and since those same children are, in some cases, compelled to steal and eat the beans they are picking in order to survive, #9 is hardly a reason to love God.”

In spite of interruptions, the group was well attended and the people remained steadfast in their positive outlook toward one another, the material, and the shared experiences. Over the eight weeks, the group consistently included seven to ten people keenly engaged in the process, which began with dinner and energetic conversation every Monday evening and usually ended with dessert, accompanied by spontaneous, extended fellowship. Only severe weather, illness, and previously scheduled, out-of-town business trips interfered with group attendance. The participants eagerly moved into each ninety-minute session in the midst of the awkwardness sometimes inherent in rich diversity.

The “Ending Program Evaluation”<sup>271</sup> (EPE) made use of the same scale descriptors as the IPI for four categories of questions. The first area of inquiry focused on the frequency of talking about one’s spiritual life or one’s journey of faith with various groups of people. These questions were worded precisely the same as the IPI. In this area, the group represented itself as talking about their spiritual lives with a frequency level that was slightly lower on March 15 than it was eight weeks prior. The second area of inquiry, also worded precisely the same as the IPI, included levels of comfort in listening, conversing, and prayer associated with the stories of people in the participants’ lives. The group represented itself with a slightly higher score than the initial survey in January.

---

<sup>271</sup>See Appendix C for the original survey, March 15, 2010. The Ending Program Evaluation (EPE) was a twenty-two-question survey intended to measure growth of the group members in confidence and in skill development for sharing their faith immediately following the eight small group sessions.

The third area of inquiry asked the group members to provide narrative descriptions of their personal experiences and opinions about the material, the group process, the group facilitator, and their own contributions to the group. Regular comments about the overwhelming amount of material led six participants to desire longer sessions or more than eight sessions. The group was extremely engaged in the subject matter and the group experience, but reported that there was too much material to cover in eight ninety-minute sessions. Frustration with time constraints was mentioned in ten of ten EPE's. Sharing their own stories and listening to the stories of the other participants was depicted as a highlight in nine of ten evaluations. The discovery of new and useful insights into the life of Jesus Christ was mentioned in eight of ten surveys as an important aspect of the group learning. While various forms of diversity in the group contributed to consistent interruptions, the same diversity provided a rich awareness of the distinct, individually focused ways Jesus related to people and called people into new life with God.

The most illuminating result from the EPE came out of the fourth area of inquiry, which recorded increases in confidence, desire, and practice associated with using words to share one's faith, sharing one's faith apart from words, abiding in Christ, and welcoming people into the community of faith. The participants were asked to describe their overall experience as a result of the eight-week small group. Assessing growth in their desire to share their stories of faith and the stories of Jesus using words, the participants indicated moderate to "very much" growth. A similar measure of growth was documented concerning the desire to share their faith apart from using words. In terms of developing confidence, the group evaluated its growth as moderately low. The group

members were asked to record the number of times they have been asked about their faith story outside the small group. Five participants indicated being asked about their faith zero times. One group member indicated being asked once. One participant indicated twice; one indicated three times, and two group members indicated being asked about their faith journey more than three times. A very low incidence of inquiry from those outside the small group into the faith stories of the participants was reported. During the field test, however, the group members indicated great interest in the stories and lives of the other participants. The highest level of growth came in the form of practicing welcoming skills and spiritual habits for abiding in Christ. Group members named specific spiritual disciplines practiced outside the group as well as particular acts of kindness initiated as a form of welcoming marginalized people into the good news.

### **Evaluation of the Field Test**

Data gathered from three sources informed the evaluation of the 2010 field test: the participants' written comments recorded in the confidential, weekly surveys filled out immediately after each small group, the EPE, and frequent personal interviews between the facilitator and the participants over the eight-week experiment. The following assessment of the learning process is organized into three categories: evidence of growth in evangelism attitudes and practices, experiences and activities within which the group thrived, and activities the group resisted or opposed. The outcomes evaluated here relate to listening, conversing, abiding in Christ, storytelling, and welcoming skills as expressions of Christian witness.

First, evidence of growth in evangelism attitudes and practices was minimal. The context of the life experiences and faith decisions of each group member played a crucial

role in the slow development of new attitudes and practices of evangelism. Half of the participants came to the group partially motivated and confident in sharing their faith; the other half arrived in the small group with very little interest in sharing their faith. Though all the participants used a variety of language to describe themselves as “finding faith in Christ,” or “wanting to be Christian,” or “on a spiritual journey toward God and Christ,” some were not yet ready to define themselves as being a Christian. Half of the group used the language “*I am Christian*,” or “*I am becoming Christian*” but did not report, “*I am a Christian*.” Since the EPE revealed an increase in desire to share their faith, combined with consistent interest in marginalized people being welcomed into Christian community, a slight, though noticeable, positive change in the participants’ attitudes about evangelism must be acknowledged.

The second category for evaluation assessed the experiences and activities in which the group thrived. The following represent activities the group consistently enjoyed, accessed quickly, and began to assimilate into their lives. All of the Jesus stories and the activities associated with the stories were well received and resulted in a high likelihood for future application. For example, during week four, the experiences associated with Luke 10 engaged the group’s imagination beautifully. The idea that the lawyer may have asked the wrong question of Jesus and that Jesus may have turned the focus of the question upside down from “who is my neighbor?” to “are you a neighbor?” resulted in creating initial common ground for the group’s process. The common ground established by the Jesus stories extended naturally into group discussions. For example, most of the group members did not resonate with teaching around conversion. They did, however, learn from and appreciate conversations about a Jesus story that included

ongoing conversion possibilities. For example, the woman at the well (John 4), Zacchaeus (Luke 19), Nicodemus (John 3, 7, 19), Bartimaeus (Mark 10), and the thankful, Samaritan leper (Luke 17) were all understood and discussed as conversions. One possible factor related to their positive experience of talking about in-process conversion may be that many of the participants identify personally with a progressive, rather than a moment-in-time, conversion.

Other positive, well received experiences included the five videos, which consistently resulted in fruitful conversation, inviting a natural redefinition of evangelism for the group. The friendship and fellowship aspect of the group flourished. Most weeks, more than half of the group stayed well past the official ending time to talk, eat dessert and spend time together. They enjoyed getting to know one another in spite of frequent moments of clumsy conversation. Each of the participants had more questions, observations, and comments than time permitted. Their eagerness to talk and spend time together was indicative of a positive group experience. Their perceptions of evangelism were shifting, and their desire to engage in new evangelism practices seemed to grow.

The third category for evaluation includes the experiences and activities that created hurdles to learning. The most common hurdle related to the wish list. The wish list activities received more negative reactions and more inaction than expected. One female offered the following, “I have only enough energy to think about my family, not really any one else....” Her feelings about the wish list were, however, inconsistent with how she lived her life. For example, she was active in relationship with a Korean family that recently moved into her neighborhood as well other friendship circles in her life. Attaching people to a list was viewed by her and most others in the group as

manipulative. Another female resisted the way the wish list was presented during week one, but softened a little when the wish list was described later using the words of Martha Grace Reese during week four. Since the wish list was foundational to helping people look outward toward others as an expression of the gospel, the group's resistance encouraged the writer to discover a better way of presenting the wish list idea.

The group unanimously opposed both UCC booklets, *16 Reasons I Love God* and *16 Reasons I Love Jesus*. The booklet about God was in fact offensive to the participants, while the booklet about Jesus elicited less resistance. Since six of the ten participants had an eye for artistic value, they reported that the look and feel of the colors, the font, and the physical pages left an immediate and non-retractable negative reaction. From the beginning of the group, the word evangelism disgusted each of the group members with the exception of the group facilitator and the one staunch, though not offensive, conservative evangelical. The word was very unwelcome to the group, and the sessions made little to no difference in this strong opinion forged over time by negative experiences. In general and with few exceptions, the group did not like praying aloud, although the facilitator confirmed in private conversations with each participant that prayer is an important dynamic for most of their spiritual lives.

One final hurdle came in the form of consistent comments that the sessions had too much content and not enough time to engage the material effectively. The general remarks can be summarized by one male who wrote on the evaluation for week six, "We need more time. Lots of good stuff to ponder and share, but we need more time to do it." Feeling rushed and being unable to complete important activities consistently deterred the learning process.

### **Adaptation Based on Accomplishments and Shortcomings**

The intended outcome of the program was the re-discovery of Christian witness reflected in the life and stories of Jesus Christ. The group made significant progress in reshaping their understandings of faith sharing, in spite of limited evidence of specific changes in faith sharing behaviors. The strategy accomplished the beginning stages of re-discovery in four specific areas and carried the weight of three shortcomings needing to be repaired in order to accomplish a more effective re-discovery of the stories of Jesus as a model for Christian witness in the twenty-first century. The first accomplishment of the small group material was consistently meaningful engagement with the stories of Jesus. The group members were remarkably drawn to Jesus: the ways he treated people, the ways people responded to him, and the ways he moved in the world in response to human need. The most important achievement of the eight weeks was that the participants were pulled into the life and stories of Jesus Christ with a rich, natural ease. Second, the group accomplished a great deal of spiritual companionship, trusted community, and safety in meeting together around important spiritual questions and experiences. They discovered together the joy of disclosing their stories and sharing spiritual life together, if only temporarily. Third, the group members improved their listening and conversation skills in relation to their spiritual lives. Through self-reflection activities, they made specific connections between listening to each other and witnessing to the good news. The fourth accomplishment was the successful enabling of the group members' skills and desires for living more aligned with the way of love. Their experience of the stories of Jesus enabled them to apply the way of love by listening more carefully to each other, to strangers in



need, and to individuals populating their everyday lives. Also concerning the way of love, the group made insightful connections to the habits associated with abiding in Christ.

Three substantial shortcomings must be noted. First, and of major importance, is the tremendous void created by the fact that the strategy did not include preaching or teaching of the specific texts. The initial vision for the strategy integrated a teaching or preaching approach that focused the small group and the whole church on the same Bible passages each week. As a result of constraints within the community of Sixth Avenue UCC, these sermons or teaching modules were not written or delivered. The writer believes this void restricted the group's understanding of the context of each story. Most of the group members had minimal biblical training and needed more thorough teaching about the passages. The writer perceives the strategy as less effective without the reinforcement and integration of preaching or teaching in addition to the small group experiences of the stories. The second shortcoming related to the wish lists. The lists did not accomplish what this writer or Martha Grace Reese in *Unbinding the Gospel* hoped would be achieved.<sup>272</sup> Inspiring the group to focus specifically on a few people in their lives who did not yet know the good news did not produce measurable success over the course of the test case.

The third shortcoming of the strategy related to the insufficiency of the small group as a community. The small group did not operate out of an integrated, broader community of faith. While the ten participants were associated with Sixth Avenue UCC, a central, missional community from which evangelism practices could grow organically was not present. The original intention of the strategy included a vibrant local community

---

<sup>272</sup>Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel*, 186.

at the center. Along the way, positive, practical UCC examples were discovered at First Plymouth Congregational UCC in Englewood, Colorado, where lay people developed an outwardly focused, service-oriented outreach, “Living Our Faith Together” (LOFT).<sup>273</sup> Similar to the ministries of Vineyard Christian Fellowship in Cincinnati, Ohio, the monthly activities of LOFT represented a United Church of Christ version of *Conspiracy of Kindness*.<sup>274</sup> At Steve Sjogren’s church, the results of community-centered service and outreach through acts of kindness were profound as many unchurched people were drawn into the church, into relationship with God, and into relationship with Christians in Cincinnati.

The story of the good news is carried forward as invitation into community and is rooted in community. Lesslie Newbigin goes as far as to declare that gospel “invitation will come with winsomeness if it comes from a community in which the grace of the Redeemer is at work.”<sup>275</sup> The strategy did not produce full evidence of the ongoing, community-centered gospel movement into the world. Due in part to the three shortcomings, the strategy only partially achieved the intended outcomes of developing confidence for faith sharing and helping the ten participants develop specific skills to enhance their Christian witnessing efforts.

---

<sup>273</sup>Living Our Faith Together (LOFT) at First Plymouth Congregational UCC Church originated during the fall of 2009 under the lay leadership of Heather Greenwood and a team of parishioners. While the mission of LOFT continues to evolve, the original stated mission from November 2009 was “to enable the people of First Plymouth Church on our faith journeys to answer God’s call to live a life of service and to pass on the teachings of Jesus as we actively live out our faith together.” LOFT embodied a form of service to the community outside the walls of the church that was congruent with UCC values. They saw themselves as “doing outreach and sharing a non-threatening message of faith with non-church going members of the community.”

<sup>274</sup>Sjogren, *Conspiracy of Kindness*.

<sup>275</sup>Quoted from Krish Kandiah’s article in *Christianity Today*, “The Missionary Who Wouldn’t Retire,” January 2010, 47.

In light of the strategy's accomplishments and shortcomings, a proposal to adapt the program for future use in Metro Denver Association (MDA) UCC Churches is outlined. The following proposal will be suggested to the Association late in the spring of 2010 through the writer's In-Discernment ordination advisor, Rev. Dr. Phil Campbell, as well as the MDA In-Discernment Committee, the MDA Ministry Council, and specific MDA UCC churches. The proposal will include the eight small groups plus adaptations evolving out of the Sixth Avenue field test. In order to determine the best approach to future modifications, five main changes are suggested and offered as a field test with an MDA pastor group during the summer of 2010 or 2011.

The five changes include tactical shifts in the content and timing, as well as one strategic modification. First, a radically new explanation of the wish lists will be developed so that participants can engage without feeling as though their wish list people serve as a targeted evangelism audience. Second, tools that might be mistaken as tracts will be eliminated. Third, progress toward reclaiming the word *evangelism* will move forward, in spite of resistance from nine of ten participants. The writer remains committed to reclaiming the word while directing the Church away from aggressive attempts to motivate people with threats of hell. Reclaiming the word *evangelism* also includes letting go of the needs to convince people they are wrong or to persuade people that they must believe precisely what the evangelist declares. Fourth, in response to the request for less content, some portions of the material will be removed, and two weeks will be added to the time frame in order to facilitate a less hurried learning process.

The one crucial strategic change involves helping group members grasp more thoroughly the context of the Bible stories in order to emphasize the patterns of witness

established by Jesus. Due to a wide-ranging biblical malaise, combined with the positive authority afforded the sermon in the UCC, the vacancy of parallel sermons or teaching was an essential element lacking in the overall strategy. For example, context defined as seeing the story through the woman's eyes in John 4, or through the eyes of the disciples in John 15, the lawyer in Luke 10, Bartimaeus in Mark 10, the Pharisee Nicodemus throughout the gospel of John, Zacchaeus in Luke 19, and the healed lepers in Luke 17, was much more important than the writer had first assumed. If the addition of relevant sermons or teachings is not possible, supplemental pre-reading may be used to enhance the learning process.

### **Discovery of Trans-denominational Opportunities**

Over the course of the project, trans-denominational opportunities surfaced. Two local pastors in Denver showed enthusiastic interest in the strategy for their congregations. House For All Sinners and Saints (House), an Evangelical Lutheran Church of America mission church, and Highlands Church (Highlands), a new open and affirming evangelical church plant, are eager to adapt the material for their settings in order to expand their congregations' understanding and experience of evangelism. House describes itself as

A group of folks figuring out how to be a liturgical, Christo-centric, social justice oriented, queer inclusive, incarnational contemplative, irreverent, ancient-future church with a progressive but deeply rooted theological imagination. We believe that we are all simultaneously 100% sinner and saint and that no one is climbing the spiritual ladder to God, but that God always comes down to us and often in surprising, beautiful, or even disturbing ways.<sup>276</sup>

---

<sup>276</sup>Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber, *A Denver Book of Prayer: Faith in Paradox* (Denver: Urban Skye, 2009), 106.

The ethos of Highlands is described using the following “jingle.”<sup>277</sup>

Married, divorced or single here, it’s one family that mingles here. Conservative or liberal here, we’ve all gotta give a little here. Big or small here, there’s room for us all here. Doubt or believe here, we all can receive here. Gay\* or straight here, there’s no hate here. Woman or man here, everyone can here. Whatever your race here, for all of us grace here. In imitation of the ridiculous love Almighty God has for each of us and all of us, let us live and love without labels.”<sup>278</sup>

Both churches represent Denver communities of Christ’s love for all, living expressions of Christ’s body uniquely positioned to share the good news, teach evangelism, and live the Jesus way of life with authenticity, openness, and a strong, but non-domineering theological center. The writer intends to assist with the adaptation and facilitation of the strategy for House and Highlands over the next twenty-four months.

Finally, in future cases within the UCC and in other churches, the possibility of choosing specific passages that align with the lectionary texts must be considered. The stories of Jesus Christ related to the way he embodied the good news, served people, and witnessed to the good news can be found throughout the gospels. The paradigm for evangelism based in his interactions with people provides the church with many more opportunities than could be covered here for re-discovering the stories of Jesus in order to empower lay people to share their faith.

---

<sup>277</sup> Highlands Pastor Mark Tidd penned the words he refers to as a jingle in 2004 while serving a different church, hoping and praying that someday he and his wife would be able to be part of a Christian community where the words would resonate throughout the congregation.

<sup>278</sup> During worship services, every other week, Mark uses the word *queer* instead of *gay* because the people thirty years of age and younger prefer *queer* while those over thirty years of age prefer *gay*.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

My exploratory journey into the life of the UCC, into the local church at Sixth Avenue, and into some of the biblical and theological terrain of evangelism has come to an end. The adventure was escorted by nine authors whose insights supported the building of potential bridges between the UCC and other expressions of mission related to Christian witness. Guided by the particular ways Jesus Christ witnessed to the good news in the first century context, I observed dynamic patterns that led to a variety of approaches used by Jesus to welcome human beings into the life and love of God. It was important to rediscover the stories of Jesus Christ as the uncomplicated, unpretentious model for Christian witnessing. Out of the life and stories of Jesus, I began the work of re-imagining evangelism as a way of life anchored in abiding in Christ.

After acknowledging ten necessary shifts in evangelism for the twenty-first-century setting, I envisioned a theology of evangelism ministry upheld by the role of the pastor and executed primarily through the laity. When addressing the importance of empowering laypeople in the UCC, David Schoen highlights this paper's conclusions concerning the supportive role of the pastor and the central, active role of the laity in the process of evangelism. "Churches that are vital and growing are churches that practice the ministry of all believers. Successful, growing congregations train their laity, and recognize the gifts of the laity when they join. Effective pastors are leaders who train other leaders, and who are not threatened by their ministry to others."<sup>279</sup> Theological

---

<sup>279</sup>David Schoen, "Where Will We Be In 2020?" *Prism, A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 29.

reflections then led to a strategy that empowered laypeople at Sixth Avenue to share their faith by learning and practicing five skill sets.

It is appropriate to end this exploration of Christian witness on behalf of the UCC by summarizing the findings of the paper related to witnessing grounded in listening, storytelling, conversing, welcoming, and abiding in Christ. I realized along the way that these five skills sets were helpful entry points for evangelism. In the UCC, however, rather than skill sets, “conversion arts” may suit better the rediscovery of effective, respectful evangelism. One UCC conference minister cast a similar vision.

The United Church of Christ will need to become much more of a missionary church. We have much to learn in this area. It does not come as naturally to us as to some other traditions....we will need to learn the arts of converting persons to Christ, making disciples in a way that is honest to who we are. Too often we have left people exactly where they began – with their unformed and often quite self-absorbed spirituality – and have not helped them move to a Christ-centered and other-directed faith, grounded in a sovereign God.<sup>280</sup>

### **Five Conversion Arts in the United Church of Christ**

In response to the need to learn the arts of converting persons to Christ, an ancient paradigm has been championed: the way of Jesus, the way of love practiced through five conversion arts. The first was listening. Those who follow Jesus Christ and wish to bear witness to the life, death, and resurrection of Christ must have a “genuine commitment to try and understand their [another person’s] position and their feelings.”<sup>281</sup> The paper acknowledged that the authentic listener was changed by the act of true listening and that

---

<sup>280</sup>David S. Moyer, “Building toward a Hopeful Vision: Reflections on the Future of the United Church of Christ,” *Prism, A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 55.

<sup>281</sup>Alan Jamieson, Jenny McIntosh, and Adrienne Thompson, *Church Leavers: Faith Journey’s Five Years On* (London: SPCK, 2006), 109.

“listening is the hope of the church of the future.”<sup>282</sup> In the work of evangelism for the twenty-first century, an underlying reality exists between the message bringer and the message receiver. The ones telling the stories of Jesus must do so in a manner consistent with the way of Jesus. The ones who might receive the story must be listened to, because “until they are heard, they cannot hear.”<sup>283</sup>

Storytelling, the second skill set or conversion art was challenging for the UCC to practice. Brueggemann cautions us that “evangelism is no safe church activity that will sustain a conventional church, nor a routine enterprise that will support a societal status quo.... The drama of evangelism is no once-for-all event.”<sup>284</sup> A strong theological center around the uniqueness of Christ surfaced as the primary pre-requisite for telling the Christian story. While the UCC is moderately Christ-centered, some UCC members and pastors in the Metro Denver Association admit that “Jesus is up for grabs in the UCC.”<sup>285</sup> A gospel focused on the person, work, and teachings of Jesus Christ combined with evangelism described as the proclamation of the gospel story created some theological tension for Sixth Avenue. As with most UCC churches, Sixth Avenue acknowledges that Jesus Christ showed us most clearly who God is and how God acts in the world. The tension for some in the UCC exists because the broadest possible understanding of diversity, at times, must relegate Jesus Christ to the sidelines in a way that would make

---

<sup>282</sup>Jamieson, McIntosh, and Thompson, *Church Leavers*, 113.

<sup>283</sup>*Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>284</sup>Brueggemann, *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism*, 129.

<sup>285</sup>The writer participated in several conversations of a theological nature with professors, students, and in-discernment ordination candidates at Iliff Theological Seminary where this phrase was used to describe the wide-diversity of acceptable positions related to the divinity, humanity, life, ministry, death, resurrection, and return of Jesus Christ, Denver, 2009.



this proposal for evangelism unacceptable. Questions related to the nature and content of the Jesus-story could in fact muffle the work of Christian witness in the twenty-first century. Particularly for unchurched people who may want or need to hear the story clearly, tensions surrounding who Jesus Christ was and who Jesus Christ is need to find resolve in local church settings so that Christian witness can be fruitful and effective. I tentatively concluded that the UCC would benefit from clarity around issues related to the uniqueness of Christ in order to move toward effective practices of evangelism.

Third, concerning the art of conversation, I came to see that mutual conversation as an entry point for evangelism finds a strong place in this ancient paradigm for evangelism. Dialogue was especially effective for evangelism when one of the conversationalists was abiding in Christ, sensitive to the Holy Spirit's movement in the world, and humbly engaging in all five of the arts of conversion while also praying for the other to find faith in Christ in the person's own and God's timing. With Jesus Christ as the prototype, conversation was seen as attentiveness to individual people and alertness to the work of the Spirit. Throughout the course of this project, conversation was recognized as the unifying art or skill set, because conversation provided a reciprocal connection between people. In the middle of conversations, God actively worked the goodness and grace of Jesus Christ into the fabric of human relationships.

Fourth, many risks accompanied the art of welcoming. Unintentionally, welcoming can imply a position of dominance over others. As long as those bringing the message referred to certain persons as poor, marginalized, or lost, a disguised status of supremacy was a hindrance to sharing the message of God's fierce, free, undeserved love. The gospel, I discovered, was best offered in mutual relationship, from the side, not from

above; as incarnation, not as superiority. The task of caring for society's marginalized, including those who live in poverty, must move forward with ever increasing dignity, collaboration, and togetherness. The UCC, uniquely situated as a united and uniting church, has the potential to be instrumental in creating synergy between hosts of other denominations, organizations, and individuals around efforts of holistic evangelism.

The unity of the Church matters to mission and evangelism. Disunity, unlike diversity, undermines the spreading of the gospel in a relationally disconnected, hurting world. The denomination may be positioned as a lighthouse for the larger Body of Christ, particularly if the UCC arranges itself alongside others in the work of evangelism. The church could benefit from finding new partnerships in order to share the message that God in Christ in the Holy Spirit is redeeming the whole world. Redemption finds its source and center in the life, ministry, death, resurrection, and imminent return of the glorified Christ. Welcoming, in its wide variety of forms, is at the heart of what Jesus did and what followers of Christ must do also. A clear conclusion from the work of the strategy was that effective evangelism results not only in conversion, but also in the welcoming and empowering of people into an ongoing, abiding relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The heavy emphasis on relationship with God found in the stories of Jesus requires that those bringing the message of the good news take great care in practicing the fifth art of abiding in Christ. Abiding became the primary energy source out of which the gospel was shared, and it became the end to which Christ followers invite other human beings. To strengthen good news message bringers in the art of abiding in Christ, the strategy offered three of many transformative spiritual habits: silence/solitude,

Scripture study, and surrender. The project could not address all the spiritual practices available to followers of Christ. The paper did, however, create experiences based in three spiritual habits. These three were engaged by Jesus as a part of the natural course of his abiding relationship with the Father. Since the paper advocated Jesus as the exemplar of evangelism, I determined that following him in pursuit of intimacy with God was a solid beginning point for evangelism.

### **Looking Back and Moving Forward**

In many different ways and on unpredictable time lines, God unlocks for us the marvelous power and unstoppable love of the gospel. Like the Samaritan woman, who told her story immediately after meeting Jesus at the well, the calling and empowering of Christian witness can come into existence quickly. Like Nicodemus or Michelangelo, it may take a lifetime to engage in faith sharing. Like Michelle (not her real name) from the Sixth Avenue field test group, faith sharing can creep up on us as the Holy Spirit slowly captures our minds and tenderly captivates our hearts.

She had tears in her eyes as she shared her heart-wrenching faith story in barely audible, disjointed sentences. Michelle waited until the final evening of the Monday night small group sessions to talk about her life with God. Prior to this experience, she had never shared her journey of faith with a group of people; she had not put her faith into words. On the night she shared about her faith, the telling opened a flood gate bursting with many years of pain and disappointment associated with her suicidal, abusive, neglectful father, her alcoholic mother, and with God. The other small group participants listened attentively, without offering advice, or insensitively challenging her to receive Christ into her heart, or fixing her way of thinking about God and Jesus Christ. Several

group members also conversed with Michelle in ways reflective of a welcoming style of Christian witness identified here as story-centered and listening-focused. The group experienced solidarity with Michelle and with her story. We felt honored that she would trust us enough to speak her journey aloud to us. The group's response to Michelle's story appeared very much aligned with the way of Jesus.

Knowing that she was "struggling to believe in God right now,"<sup>286</sup> and that the telling of her story reminded her of the "torture and fear"<sup>287</sup> under which she grew up, I felt the desire to listen carefully to her and to God on her behalf. In the midst of my prayers, I had two impressions, spirit-led intuitions concerning the heart of God for Michelle.

Over the last two years of our shared experience at Sixth Avenue and in part because of the small group, Michelle and I became good friends. Over a recent lunch conversation, we each shared our impressions of the group, the stories, and the potential of God's work in our lives. She reminded me that she was having trouble believing in God or Jesus, but that she appreciated the group. Because I witnessed God at work in her life and had a strong sense of God's response to her story, I felt a compelling urgency to share two personal observations about her story.

Prior to the arrival of my tomato soup, I shared that I believed God felt proud of her life and proud of the ways she loved her daughter, served her patients with compassion, and gently attended to those under her care who were dying of Lou Gehrig's Disease (ALS). Michelle is a gifted neurologist, a terrific mother, and a loyal friend, who

---

<sup>286</sup>Michelle spoke these words after one of the Monday night small group session, March 8, 2010.

<sup>287</sup>Michelle spoke these words during her storytelling, March 15, 2010.

is surviving a challenging life with grace and hope. Her Abba Father in heaven adores her. The words were well received, and my sense is she needs to hear more words of God's love and grace as she makes progress toward faith in Christ. The second piece of good news exchanged during lunch had to do with the suffering she experienced as a child, suffering that at times continues to haunt her. Michelle and I both cried as we discussed God's presence with her in the middle of the anguish and torment she felt. Our conversation moved toward confessions of uncertainty about why, if God is good, terrible things happen in the world. Our questioning included slavery, poverty, the 2010 tragedy in Haiti, and the misery brought on her by her earthly father. Quick to admit ignorance about the reasons for the pain, I spoke of my own trust that Jesus actually shares in our agony, in her agony. He is with us; he tenderly, tearfully suffered not only for us on the cross, but with us in our affliction.

During lunch, Michelle and I shared the gospel with one another. At her own pace, she is finding faith in Christ. At times, it surfaces as a re-discovery. Frequently, she is aware of a whole new understanding and a fresh encounter as the good news works its way into the DNA of her daily life with her daughter, at the hospitals, and in the horrible struggles that continue to occupy space around the edges of her life. At my own pace, I too am finding faith in Christ over and over again. In light of the whole gospel of the loving God, she is helping me to see with new eyes those who live in poverty, juxtaposed against the horrific consumerism of my American evangelical roots. My breakthroughs are frequently rediscoveries of very old truths, needing to be refashioned for a new world.

Any rediscovery of the ancient and current Jesus-way of evangelism is accompanied by certain heavy responsibilities for pastors, lay leaders, and all followers

of Christ. Attentiveness to the work of the Spirit in the lives of the people around us must be integrated into Christians' ordinary lives as we walk with God. Those who follow Jesus are responsible to love God and neighbor as equal expressions of the gospel in whatever context one lives. Paying attention in love and practicing the arts of conversion will empower Christian witness in anyone who wants to follow Christ. To the end that unchurched and church people of the world find the courage to tell their unfinished stories of faith, while we listen, converse, tell our stories, abide in Christ, and welcome one another into the love and life of God, may the Lord Jesus Christ be lifted high, and may many, many more of us find faith and hope in the God who adores each one of us.

## APPENDIX A

### JANUARY 24, 2010 - *INITIAL PROGRAM INQUIRY* FILLED OUT BY SIXTH AVENUE UCC SMALL GROUP PARTICIPANTS SMALL GROUP FIELD TEST JANUARY – MARCH, 2010

Please take 10 minutes to fill out the following survey. The questions are intended to establish a base-line of information for the small group experience and to provide the author with raw data. This and all other tools and questionnaires used during the 2010 field test for the small group experience are not intended for evaluating the group participants. The surveys will be used to evaluate the material and for writing appropriate future adaptations of the material.

**Your first name:**

**How long have you been attending Sixth Avenue UCC? -OR- How many times have you visited Sixth Avenue UCC?**

**Answer the following questions using a number: “1” represents never and “10” represents very often.**

1. On a scale of 1-10, over the last 5 years, how often have you talked about your spiritual life or your faith journey with your co-workers?
2. On a scale of 1-10, over the last 5 years, how often have you talked about your spiritual life or your faith journey with your friends or neighbors?
3. On a scale of 1-10, over the last 5 years, how often have you talked about your spiritual life or your faith journey with your family of origin?
4. On a scale of 1-10, over the last 5 years, how often have you talked about your spiritual life or your faith journey within your current family system?

**Answer the following questions using a number: “1” represents completely uncomfortable and “10” represents completely comfortable.**

5. On a scale of 1-10, in general how comfortable do you feel conversing about your spiritual life or your faith journey?
6. On a scale of 1-10, in general how comfortable do you feel listening to the faith stories of other people?
7. On a scale of 1-10, in general how comfortable do you feel praying by yourself?
8. On a scale of 1-10, in general how comfortable do you feel praying with others?
9. Overall, how intimidating or negative are concepts that you associate with witnessing, evangelism, or sharing your faith? Please circle or underline one of the following:  
Not at all      Just a little      Somewhat      Very      Extremely

## APPENDIX B

## JANUARY - MARCH

*The entire set of eight small group handouts, loosely formatted as a guidebook for participants, can be obtained from the author.*

**Small Group #4 Topic: Storytelling Skills from Luke 10:25-37**  
**Test Case February 15, 2010 Denver: Sixth Avenue UCC**

**The vision:** the “unbinding of the good news that God adores us and everyone else, [and] that God has shown this to us through Jesus Christ.”<sup>288</sup>

**The five marks of mission:** “To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom; to teach, baptize, and nurture new believers; to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.”<sup>289</sup>

**The purpose:** to empower lay people to share their faith in Jesus Christ in authentic, respectful ways.

**The guiding assumption:** someday each person in the group will desire to share their faith in Christ. The likelihood of being asked about one’s faith is high, particularly if those who follow Christ are living the way of love. “And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way” (1 Pet. 3:15-16 NLT).

**The session objectives:** five skills sets designed to increase confidence in faith sharing and to shape a way of life characterized by the way of love and fueled by the knowledge and experience that God does indeed adore us, all of us, and all of creation.

**Objective #4:** To begin practicing storytelling skills as a way to put our faith into words

---

<sup>288</sup>Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>289</sup> Andrew Walls and Kathy Ross, eds., *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), xi-xiv.



## Opening Prayer

**The ground rules:** Be present. Be a listener. Be authentic. Be respectful. Be confidential. Be loud enough for those who are hard of hearing.

**“In short, I had always believed that the world involved magic. Now I thought that perhaps it involved a magician. And this pointed a profound emotion always present and sub-conscious, that this world of ours has some purpose; and if there is a purpose, there is a person. I had always felt life first as a story, and if there is a story there is a story-teller.”<sup>290</sup>**

## Review and frame Luke 10:25-37

<sup>25</sup> Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he said, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?” <sup>26</sup> He said to him, “What is written in the law? What do you read there?” <sup>27</sup> He answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

<sup>28</sup> And he said to him, “You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live.”

<sup>29</sup> But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” <sup>30</sup> Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. <sup>31</sup> Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. <sup>32</sup> So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. <sup>33</sup> But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. <sup>34</sup> He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. <sup>35</sup> The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ <sup>36</sup> Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” <sup>37</sup> He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

## Questions for engaging the story as representatives of each character

After you have decided with whom you connect most and after you have moved to be near the designated sign in the room identifying your character, think carefully and talk with the rest of your group about the following questions for a few moments. As an individual, with the voice of the one you choose to represent (from their perspective), prepare to engage in the following dialogue led by the “storyteller.”

- Speaking as the Samaritan, as the lawyer, or as the Pharisee/Levite in the story, what are you feeling?
- What are you thinking?

---

<sup>290</sup>G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, (New York: Image, Doubleday, Random House, Inc., 1908, 1936, 2001), 59.

- How did you come to decide your particular course of action or non-action?
- Against whom do you have the most emotional reaction (anger, empathy, confusion, etc.) and why?

**Self-Reflection: Complete the sentence.**

I connected the way of mercy, the way of love to sharing my faith by thinking differently about...

---



---



---

**1 Corinthians 13: read and discuss**

**Ending Exercise: questions for processing the story in partners**

- What does a merciful Samaritan look like today? Have you seen this story happen?
- Specifically, what would a merciful Samaritan (a “good neighbor”) look like in your world?
- How might the story have transformed the lawyer?
- How might the story transform you?
- Why is the question, “who is my neighbor,” the wrong question?
- What might be the better question be?
- Name one connection you make between this story and evangelism and share it with the whole group.

**Ending Prayer for wish list people**

**Resources Used in Small Group #4:**

- Signs representing the three main characters of the story in Luke 10
- Bibles for reading 1 Corinthians 13 and 1 John chapters 3, 4, and 5 in order to understand more about abiding in Christ and more about loving God and loving the people on our wish lists
- Wish Lists

**Confidential, Immediate Evaluation**  
**Small Group #4: "Storytelling Skills"**

**15 Feb 2010**

Overall, how did we do together tonight? (Please circle one descriptive word.)  
 Great                  Good                  OK                  Boring                  Offensive

What kind of **progress** did you make in terms of storytelling skills related to putting your faith into words?

(Please circle one of the following phrases.)

- Big leaps ahead
- Good progress
- Some progress
- A little, but not very much
- None

Specifically concerning storytelling as a means to sharing your faith...

(Circle the word most reflective of your personal experience tonight in each of the five categories.)

1. **My understanding of how** to put my faith into words expanded:

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

2. **My desire for more grace** in my own life grew:

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

3. **Beginning to practice** putting my faith into words was helpful:

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

4. **My confidence** in faith sharing grew:

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

5. **My compassion** for those who are in need grew:

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

If you have anything you want to discuss, write your name down. Jenny will call you.

*If you have a suggestion to make the experience better, or any correction you can offer concerning the material, the presentation, the content, or your experience, jot a note on the back.*

**Small Group #5 Topic: Storytelling Skills from Luke 19:1-10**  
**Test Case February 22, 2010**  
**Denver, Colorado: Sixth Avenue UCC**

**Conversation Questions and film clip linking the heroic Samaritan from Luke 10 and today's story from Luke 19: "Bullhorn" Nooma Video**

**The vision:** the “unbinding of the good news that God adores us and everyone else, [and] that God has shown this to us through Jesus Christ.”<sup>291</sup>

Our adapted **five marks of mission:** to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth; to proclaim the good news of the realm of God; to teach, baptize, and nurture new followers of Christ in the way of love.

**The purpose:** to empower lay people to share their faith in Jesus Christ in authentic, respectful ways.

**The guiding assumption:** someday each person in the group will desire to share their faith in Christ. The likelihood of being asked about one's faith is high, particularly if those who follow Christ are living the way of love. “And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way” (1 Pet. 3:15-15 NLT).

**Objective #5:** to increase our confidence in faith sharing and to shape a way of life characterized by the way of love and fueled by the knowledge and experience that God does indeed adore us, all of us, and all of creation. For tonight, the objective is to continue practicing storytelling skills as a way to put our faith into words

**Opening Prayer**

**The ground rules:** Be present. Be a listener. Be authentic. Be respectful. Be confidential. Be loud enough for those who are hard of hearing.

**Extra Activity: “16 Reasons I Love God”**

---

<sup>291</sup>Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 3.

### **Review and frame Luke 19:1-10**

He entered Jericho and was passing through it.<sup>2</sup> A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich.<sup>3</sup> He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature.<sup>4</sup> So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way.<sup>5</sup> When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.”<sup>6</sup> So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him.<sup>7</sup> All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.”<sup>8</sup> Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.”<sup>9</sup> Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham.”<sup>10</sup> For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.

### **Activity with partners using discussion questions...After working with a partner, report to the group**

### **Ezekiel 34:11-16**

<sup>11</sup> For thus says the Lord GOD: **I myself will search** for my sheep, and **will seek them out.** <sup>12</sup> **As shepherds seek out their flocks** when they are among their scattered sheep, so **I will seek** out my sheep. I will rescue them from all the places to which they have been scattered on a day of clouds and thick darkness.<sup>13</sup> I will bring them out from the peoples and gather them from the countries, and will bring them into their own land; and I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the watercourses, and in all the inhabited parts of the land.<sup>14</sup> **I will feed them with good pasture,** and the mountain heights of Israel shall be their pasture; there they shall lie down in good grazing land, and they shall feed on rich pasture on the mountains of Israel.<sup>15</sup> **I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep,** and I will make them lie down, says the Lord GOD.<sup>16</sup> **I will seek the lost,** and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice (Ezek. 34:11-16 NRSV).

### **Ending Exercises:**

In order to practice storytelling, take one minute to reflect on the story of Zacchaeus. Based on what you already believe about God and tonight’s story, speak a piece of good news specifically offering it to your conversation partner.

Finally, tell your partner a short story about someone on your wish list or someone you love. Either focus on a portion of their story related to faith, religion, and belief in Jesus or explain hypothetically how that person might respond to “the bullhorn guy.” Once you have each finished telling a story, pray briefly for one another’s wish list person.

### **Closing Prayer:**

“Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, have mercy on us...

## Resources Used in Small Group #5

- “16 Reasons I love God,” by Quinn G. Caldwell (Cleveland: The Congregational Vitality of Local Church Ministries of the UCC, 2008).
- 20 or more discussion questions for the Luke 19:1-10 activity
- Wish Lists
- Bibles
- [www.Nooma.com](http://www.Nooma.com) “Bullhorn” 009 by Rob Bell (Grand Rapids: Flannel and Zondervan, 2005), 12 minute DVD.
- For next week, please bring with you to the group three items representing an important spiritual aspect of yourself.

## Confidential, Immediate Evaluation

### Small Group #5: “Storytelling Skills”

22 Feb 2010

Overall, how did we do together tonight? (Please circle one descriptive word.)

Great                  Good                  OK                  Boring                  Offensive

What kind of **progress** did you make in terms of storytelling skills related to putting your faith into words?

(Please circle one of the following phrases.)

Big leaps ahead  
Good progress  
Some progress  
A little, but not very much  
None

Specifically concerning storytelling as a means to sharing your faith...

(Circle the word most reflective of your personal experience tonight in each of the five categories.)

**1. My understanding of how** to put my faith into words expanded:

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

**2. My desire for more of God’s grace** in my own life grew:

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

**3. Practicing** putting one of my wish list people’s stories into words was helpful:

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

**4. My confidence** in faith sharing grew:

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

**5. My compassion** for those who are in need grew:

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

If you have anything you want to discuss, write your name down. Jenny will call you.

## Small Group #6 Topic: Storytelling Skills from Nicodemus in the Gospel of John

### Test Case March 1, 2010 Denver: Sixth Avenue UCC

**The vision:** the “unbinding of the good news that God adores us and everyone else, [and] that God has shown this to us through Jesus Christ.”<sup>292</sup>

Our adapted **five marks of mission:** to respond to human need by loving service; to seek to transform unjust structures of society; to strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth; to share stories of good news about the realm of God; to nurture new followers of Christ in the way of love.

**The purpose:** to empower lay people to share their faith in Jesus Christ in authentic, respectful ways.

**The guiding assumption:** someday each person in the group will desire to share their faith in Christ. The likelihood of being asked about one’s faith is high, particularly if those who follow Christ are living the way of love. “And if someone asks about your Christian hope, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way” (1Pet. 3:15-16 NLT).

**Objective #6:** to increase our confidence in faith sharing, in order to shape a way of life characterized by the way of love and fueled by the knowledge and experience that God does indeed adore us, all of us, and all of creation. For tonight our final experience of practicing storytelling skills as a way to put our faith into words

**The ground rules:** Be present. Be a listener. Be authentic. Be respectful. Be confidential. Be loud enough for those who are hard of hearing.

**Introductory Prayer:** “God of history, your saving love is the plot of humanity’s story. Keep me in the middle of your story and boldly sharing your story with others. In Jesus name. Amen.”<sup>293</sup>

**Introductory Activity:** Describe (or tell a story about) one of the three items you brought representing an important spiritual aspect(s) of yourself.

---

<sup>292</sup>Martha Grace Reese, *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008), 3.

<sup>293</sup>Eugene H. Peterson and Peter Santucci, *Tell It Slant Study Guide* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 44.

## The Story of Nicodemus from the Gospel of John

### John 3:1-21

Now there was a Pharisee named Nicodemus, a leader of the Jews. <sup>2</sup> He came to Jesus by night and said to him, “Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God; for no one can do these signs that you do apart from the presence of God.” <sup>3</sup> Jesus answered him, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.” <sup>4</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can anyone be born after having grown old? Can one enter a second time into the mother’s womb and be born?” <sup>5</sup> Jesus answered, “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit. <sup>6</sup> What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit. <sup>7</sup> Do not be astonished that I said to you, ‘You must be born from above.’ <sup>8</sup> The wind blows where it chooses, and you hear the sound of it, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit.” <sup>9</sup> Nicodemus said to him, “How can these things be?” <sup>10</sup> Jesus answered him, “Are you a teacher of Israel, and yet you do not understand these things?

<sup>11</sup> “Very truly, I tell you, we speak of what we know and testify to what we have seen; yet you do not receive our testimony. <sup>12</sup> If I have told you about earthly things and you do not believe, how can you believe if I tell you about heavenly things? <sup>13</sup> No one has ascended into heaven except the one who descended from heaven, the Son of Man. <sup>14</sup> And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, <sup>15</sup> that whoever believes in him may have eternal life.

<sup>16</sup> “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.

<sup>17</sup> “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. <sup>18</sup> Those who believe in him are not condemned; but those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of the only Son of God. <sup>19</sup> And this is the judgment, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light because their deeds were evil. <sup>20</sup> For all who do evil hate the light and do not come to the light, so that their deeds may not be exposed. <sup>21</sup> But those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God.”

**Make observations, sketches, or notes, about the passage in order to draft a story board:**



### **John 7:40-52**

<sup>40</sup> When they heard these words, some in the crowd said, “This is really the prophet.”  
<sup>41</sup> Others said, “This is the Messiah.” But some asked, “Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?” <sup>42</sup> Has not the scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?” <sup>43</sup> So there was a division in the crowd because of him. <sup>44</sup> Some of them wanted to arrest him, but no one laid hands on him.

<sup>45</sup> Then the temple police went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, “Why did you not arrest him?” <sup>46</sup> The police answered, “Never has anyone spoken like this!” <sup>47</sup> Then the Pharisees replied, “Surely you have not been deceived too, have you?” <sup>48</sup> Has any one of the authorities or of the Pharisees believed in him? <sup>49</sup> But this crowd, which does not know the law—they are accursed.” <sup>50</sup> Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus before, and who was one of them, asked, <sup>51</sup> “Our law does not judge people without first giving them a hearing to find out what they are doing, does it?” <sup>52</sup> They replied, “Surely you are not also from Galilee, are you? Search and you will see that no prophet is to arise from Galilee.”

### **John 19:38-42**

<sup>38</sup> After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. <sup>39</sup> Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. <sup>40</sup> They took the body of Jesus and wrapped it with the spices in linen cloths, according to the burial custom of the Jews. <sup>41</sup> Now there was a garden in the place where he was crucified, and in the garden there was a new tomb in which no one had ever been laid. <sup>42</sup> And so, because it was the Jewish day of Preparation, and the tomb was nearby, they laid Jesus there.

**Make observations, sketches, or notes, about the passage in order to draft a story board:**

### **Guiding ideas and questions for story boarding Nicodemus:**

- In your triplet, construct an abbreviated version of the story.
- Make a few observations about the Pharisee named Nicodemus and how he might have changed over the years?
- How did the life and story of Nicodemus connect to the life and story of Jesus?
- How might his perceptions about Jesus Christ have changed over time?

## **OPTIONAL ACTIVITY: Michelangelo's late *Pietà***

“The *Pietà* was meant for Michelangelo's own tomb, but legend has it that in a fit of frustration (he claimed that the marble was unsuitable), Michelangelo attempted to destroy the work and was stopped by his pupils. The theme of this *Pietà* is much changed from Michelangelo's earlier version, for this work focuses on the relentless force of death that draws Christ down with a will that the human figures are powerless to resist.

The three figures present are Mary Magdalene, Joseph of Arimathea (often also identified as Nicodemus), and the Virgin. As a group, the figures are so compelling that most visitors do not notice that Christ is missing a leg. Michelangelo chose the figure of the older man, (Nicodemus or Joseph of Arimathea), in which to depict his own features, but this calm, compassionate portrayal is far removed from his violent and anguished self-portrait in *Last Judgment*.

The head of Christ, in contrast to that of the 1498-1499 *Pietà*, is cradled not by the Virgin but by Michelangelo's own incarnation of himself. Michelangelo is careful to focus (Nicodemus' or Joseph's) energies on the strength and tenderness with which the Savior should be treated in death.”<sup>294</sup>

### **Conversation with a partner to discuss what you see in the art:**

- What story do you see in this work of art?
- Describe your experience of seeing this work of art and the story you felt unfold.
- Compare and contrast your own conversion process with that of Nicodemus or Michelangelo.
- Is there anyone on your wish list or in your life might benefit from hearing about the faith story of Nicodemus or the faith story of Michelangelo or your faith story?

### **Ending Activity: review the AA storytelling model**

### **Ending prayers...**

### **Resources Used in Small Group #6**

- Photographs taken from “Michelangelo Sculptures,” by Lauren Mitchell Ruehring, <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/michelangelo-sculptures21.htm>
- Wish Lists, white boards or large paper, and markers for story boarding

---

<sup>294</sup>Dr. Ronald Goetz, a Century editor at large, holds the Niebuhr distinguished chair of theology and ethics at Elmhurst College in Elmhurst, Illinois. This article appeared in the *Christian Century* (March 21-28, 1984): 299. Copyright by the Christian Century Foundation and used by permission. Current articles and subscription information can be found at [www.christiancentury.org](http://www.christiancentury.org). This material was prepared for Religion Online by Ted and Winnie Brock.

- Preparation for the Optional Assignment due next week, modeled after *Alcoholics Anonymous*<sup>295</sup>:
  1. Describe what you used to be like prior to seeking God or prior to being connected to Jesus Christ.
  2. Recount honestly and vulnerably what happened (or what is now happening) to help you consider following Christ or describe a moment of grace that led you eventually to follow Christ.
  3. Explain what your current faith journey is like...what does it mean for you to follow Christ today?

### **Confidential, Immediate Evaluation**

#### **Small Group #6: "Storytelling Skills"**

**1 March 2010**

Overall, what was your experience of the evening? (Please circle one descriptive word.)

Great                  Good                  OK                  Bored                  Offended

What kind of **progress** did you make this week in terms of storytelling skills related to putting your faith into words? (Please circle one of the following phrases.)

Big leaps ahead  
Good progress  
Some progress  
A little, but not very much  
None

Specifically concerning storytelling as a way to share your faith... (Circle the word most reflective of your personal experience tonight in each of the five categories.)

**1. My understanding of how to put my faith into words expanded:**

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

**2. My desire for more of God's grace in my own life grew:**

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

**3. My confidence in sharing portions of my own story grew:**

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

**4. My compassion for those who are in need grew:**

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

**5. Our preparation for putting my faith into words for next week (using the AA pattern) was helpful:**

WOW!                  Lots                  Somewhat                  A little                  Not at all

*If you have a suggestion to make the experience better, or any correction you can offer concerning the material, the presentation, the content, or your experience, jot a note on the back.*

---

<sup>295</sup><http://www.aa.org/lang/en/subpage.cfm?page=1> All information obtained from the Alcoholics Anonymous® website.

## APPENDIX C

MARCH 15, 2010

***Ending Program Evaluation***

**Filled out by Sixth Avenue UCC Small Group Participants  
Small Group Field Test January – March 2010**

**Your Name (optional):** \_\_\_\_\_

**Answer the following questions using a number: “1” represents never and “10” represents very often.**

1. On a scale of 1-10, over the last 8 weeks, how often have you talked about your spiritual life or your faith journey *with your co-workers*?
2. On a scale of 1-10, over the last 8 weeks, how often have you talked about your spiritual life or your faith journey *with your friends or neighbors*?
3. On a scale of 1-10, over the last 8 weeks, how often have you talked about your spiritual life or your faith journey *with your family of origin*?
4. On a scale of 1-10, over the last 8 weeks, how often have you talked about your spiritual life or your faith journey *within your current family system or in your home*?

**Answer the following questions using a number: “1” represents completely uncomfortable and “10” represents completely comfortable.**

5. On a scale of 1-10, in general how *comfortable do you feel conversing* about your spiritual life or your faith journey?
6. On a scale of 1-10, in general how *comfortable do you feel listening* to the faith stories of other people?
7. On a scale of 1-10, in general how *comfortable do you feel praying by yourself*?
8. On a scale of 1-10, in general how *comfortable do you feel praying with others*?

**From your perspective, please answer the following questions.**

9. Please name one experience or activity from our time together that you will not soon forget.
10. What improvement to the material would you suggest?
11. What improvement to the group process would you suggest?

12. What was the best part of the eight weeks for you?
13. What was the toughest, most irritating, or most confusing part of the eight weeks?
14. How could *you* have made this a better experience for yourself?
15. How could *the group facilitator* have offered a better experience for you?

**Please answer the following questions by circling the word that best describes your overall experience as a result of the eight week small group.**

16. *My confidence* for sharing my stories of faith *using words* increased:  
           Not at all      Just a little      Somewhat      Very much      In amazing ways
17. *My desire* to share my faith and the stories of Jesus Christ *using words* grew:  
           Not at all      Just a little      Somewhat      Very much      In amazing ways
18. *My confidence* for sharing my stories of faith *apart from using words* increased:  
           Not at all      Just a little      Somewhat      Very much      In amazing ways
19. *My desire* to share my faith and the stories of Jesus Christ *apart from using words* grew:  
           Not at all      Just a little      Somewhat      Very much      In amazing ways
20. In addition to the Monday night small group, over the last eight weeks I have been asked about my faith, my relationship with God, or my faith story:  
           Zero times      One time      Two times      Three times      More than three times
21. In addition to the Monday night small group, over the last eight weeks I practiced spiritual habits associated with abiding in Christ, for example silence, solitude, Scripture study, or any others:  
           Zero times      One time      2-5 times      6-10 times      More than 10 times
22. Over the last eight weeks I practiced welcoming (in any form: act of kindness, using words, an invitation, etc.) a person who is living in poverty or who might be a marginalized person:  
           Zero times      One time      2-5 times      6-10 times      More than 10 times

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balz, H. R., and G. Schneider. *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Translation of Exegetisches Worterbuch zum Neuen Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993.
- Baucknam, Richard. *Bible and Mission: Christian Witness in a Postmodern World*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2003.
- Bausch, William J. *In the Beginning, There Were Stories*. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2004.
- Bean, Lydia. "Bridging the Great Divide," *Sojourners* 38, no. 3, March 2009.
- Bell, Rob. *Bullhorn*. film 009. Grand Rapids: Flannel and Zondervan, 2005. 12 minutes, DVD. [www.Nooma.com](http://www.Nooma.com) (accessed March 19, 2010).
- \_\_\_\_\_, *Noise*, no. 005. Grand Rapids: Flannel and Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005. 10-minute DVD. [www.Nooma.com](http://www.Nooma.com) (accessed March 19, 2010).
- Benner, David G. *Surrender to Love: Discovering the Heart of Christian Spirituality*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003.
- Bolz-Weber, Nadia. *A Denver Book of Prayer: Faith in Paradox*. Denver: Urban Skye, March, 2009.
- Bonaventure, Saint. *The Souls Journey into God and the Life of St. Francis*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1978.
- Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *Life Together*. Translated by John W. Doberstein. San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1954.
- Bosch, David. *Transforming Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.
- Brekke, Gregg. "Living and Breathing in a New Era of Evangelical Courage." *United Church News* 25, no. 3 (June/July 2009).
- Brueggemann, Walter. *Biblical Perspectives on Evangelism: Living in a Three-Storied Universe*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1993.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Prophetic Imagination*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.
- Caldwell, Quinn G. *16 Reasons I Love God*. Cleveland: The Congregational Vitality of Local Church Ministries of the UCC, 2008.
- Caldwell, Quinn G., Martin B. Copenhaver, Lillian Daniel, and Anthony B. Robinson.

- The Bible and the United Church of Christ*. Cleveland: United Church Press, 2008.
- Chesterton, G. K. *Orthodoxy*. 1908. Reprint. New York: Random House, Inc., 2001.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *St. Francis of Assisi*. New York: Image Books, Doubleday, Random House, 1989.
- Cron, Ian Morgan. *Chasing Francis: A Pilgrim's Tale*. Colorado Springs: Navpress, 2006.
- Drane, John. *Celebrity Culture*. Edinburgh: Rutherford House, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Cultural Change and Biblical Faith*. Greensboro, NC: Paternoster Press, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Evangelism for a New Age: Creating Churches for the Next Century*. London: Marshall Pickering, 1994.
- Fee, Gordon D. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987.
- Friberg, T., B. Friberg, and N. F. Miller. *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament*. Vol. 4 in Baker's Greek New Testament Library. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000.
- Frost, Michael, and Alan Hirsch. *The Shaping of Things to Come: Innovation and Mission for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Church*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2003.
- Gibbs, Eddie. *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In Name Only: Tackling the Problem of Nominal Christianity*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books/BridgePoint, 1994.
- Gibbs, Eddie, and Ryan Bolger. *Emerging Church: Creating Christian Community in Postmodern Cultures*. Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2005.
- Gonzales, Paula. "Spirituality for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," *Radical Grace Renewing the Face of the Earth*, a publication of The Center for Action and Contemplation 22, no. 1, January-March, 2009.
- Green, J. B., S. McKnight, and I. H. Marshall. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992.

- Haroutunian, Aram. "No One Closer: A Conversation with James Houston." *Mars Hill Review*, Issue 6, Fall 1996. <http://www.leaderu.com/marshall/mhr06/houston1.html> (accessed March 19, 2010).
- Hirsch, Alan. *The Forgotten Ways: Reactivating the Missional Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2006.
- The Holy Bible: English Standard Version*. Wheaton, IL: Standard Bible Society, Crossway/Good News Publishing, 2001.
- The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989.
- The Holy Bible, Today's New International Version™ TNIV®*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.
- The Holy Bible: New Living Translation*, Text edition, 2nd ed. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2004.
- Hunter, George G. III. *The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach the West... Again*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *How to Reach Secular People*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992.
- Inge, John. *A Christian Theology of Place: Explorations in Practical, Pastoral, and Empirical Theology*. Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2003.
- Jamieson, Alan. *Church Leavers: Faith Journeys Five Years On*. London: SPCK, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *A Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys beyond the Churches*. London: SPCK, 2002.
- Jensen, Richard A. *Thinking in Story: Preaching in a Post-Literate Age*. Lima, OH: CSS Publishing, 1993.
- Johnson, Daniel L., and Charles Hambrick-Stowe. *Theology and Identity: Movements and Polity in the United Church of Christ*. Cleveland, OH: United Church Press, 2007.
- Jones, Alan W. *Soul Making: The Desert Way of Spirituality*. 1st pbk. ed. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1989.
- Kandiah, Krish. "The Missionary Who Wouldn't Retire." *Christianity Today*, January, 2010.



- Keener, C. S. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993.
- Kimball, Dan. *The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003.
- Kittel, G., Friedrich Bromiley, G. Bromiley, and G. W. Bromiley, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Translation of: Theologisches Worterbuch zum Neuen Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995.
- Kotter, John P. *Leading Change*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1996.
- Kraus, C. Norman. *The Authentic Witness, Credibility and Authority*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1979.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *An Intrusive Gospel: Christian Mission in the Postmodern World*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998.
- Marshall, I. H. *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text, The New International Greek Testament Commentary*. Exeter, England: Paternoster Press, 1978.
- McClendon, James Wm. Jr. *Biography as Theology: How Life Stories Can Remake Today's Theology*. Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Ethics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Witness: Systematic Theology*. Vol. 3. Nashville: Abingdon, 2000.
- McLaren, Brian. *More Ready Than You Realize: Evangelism as Dance in the Postmodern Matrix*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002.
- McNeal, Reggie. *The Present Future: Six Tough Questions for the Church*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003.
- McNeil, Brenda Salter. *A Credible Witness: Reflections on Power, Evangelism and Race*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2008.
- Michael. *Finding God in Alcoholics Anonymous: What the Old-Old Timers Know*. Thorofare, NJ: Xlibris Corporation, 2009.
- Moyer, David S. "Building toward a Hopeful Vision: Reflections on the Future of the United Church of Christ." *Prism, A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 51-62.
- Newbigin, Lesslie. *The Gospel in a Pluralistic Society*. Grand Rapids: William B.

Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1989.

Nouwen, Henri J. M. *Making All Things New: An Invitation to the Spiritual Life*. New York: Harper Collins, 1981.

Peace, Richard V. "Conflicting Understandings of Christian Conversion: A Missiological Challenge," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 28, no.1, January 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Conversion in the New Testament: Paul and the Twelve*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Evangelism and Spiritual Formation," *Fuller Theological Seminary News and Notes*, Fall 2004.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Holy Conversation: Talking about God in Everyday Life*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Rediscovering Evangelism: Outreach in the United Church of Christ in the Twenty-First Century*. Cleveland: United Church of Christ Congregational Vitality and Discipleship: Local Church Ministries, 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Rediscovering Evangelism in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century." *United Church News*, no. 3, June/July 2009.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Small Group Evangelism*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1985.

Peterson, Eugene H. *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places, A Conversation in Spiritual Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005.

\_\_\_\_\_. *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*. Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Tell It Slant: A Conversation on the Language of Jesus in His Stories and Prayers*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

Peterson, Eugene H., and Peter Santucci. *Tell It Slant Study Guide*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008.

Plant, Marian R. *Faith Formation in Vital Congregations*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2009.

Reese, Martha Grace. *Unbinding the Gospel: Real Life Evangelism*. The Mainline Evangelism Study. St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2008.

Reiling, J., and J. L. Swellengrebel. *A Handbook on the Gospel of Luke*. New York: United Bible Societies, 1993.

Robinson, Elaine. *Godbearing: Evangelism Reconceived*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2006.

Ruehring, Lauren Mitchell. Photographs taken from “Michelangelo Sculptures.” <http://entertainment.howstuffworks.com/michelangelo-sculptures21.htm> (accessed November 23, 2009).

Sample, Tex. *Ministry in an Oral Culture, Living with Will Rogers, Uncle Remus and Minnie Pearl*. Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1994.

Schoen, David. “Where Will We Be in 2020?” *Prism, A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2003): 25-32.

Sjogren, Steve. *Conspiracy of Kindness, A Refreshing New Approach to Sharing the Love of Jesus with Others*. Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publications, 1993.

Snodgrass, Klyne R. *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2008.

Steckel, Clyde J., and Elizabeth C. Nordbeck, eds. *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ* 18, no. 1 (Spring 2003).

Stein, R. H. *Luke, The New American Commentary*. Vol. 24 of Logos Library System, electronic edition. Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2001.

Stillspeaking Writer’s Group. *16 Reasons I Love Jesus*. Cleveland: The Congregational Vitality of Local Church Ministries of the UCC, 2008.

Strong, J. *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*. Electronic ed. Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996.

Tickle, Phyllis. *The Great Emergence: How Christianity Is Changing and Why*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2008.

United Church of Christ. *The Constitution and Bylaws of the United Church of Christ*. Cleveland: United Church of Christ Resources, 2005.

Volf, Miroslav. *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996.

- Walker, Randi Jones. *The Evolution of a UCC Style*. Cleveland: United Church Press, 2005.
- Wallis, Jim. *The Great Awakening: Reviving Faith and Politics in a Post-Religious Right America*. New York: HarperCollins, 2008.
- Walls, Andrew, and Kathy Ross, eds. *Mission in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Exploring the Five Marks of Global Mission*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008.
- Walsh, Brian J., and Sylvia C. Keesmaat. *Colossians Remixed: Subverting the Empire*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004.
- Willard, Dallas. *Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1998.
- Wright, Christopher J. H. *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006.
- Wright, N. T. "A Church Shaped by Mission." Lectures, Fuller Theological Seminary, February 23-27, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006.
- Wuthnow, Robert. *After Heaven*. Berkeley, CA: University of California, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*. New York: The Free Press, 1994.
- Youth for Christ/USA, contributing author, Jenny Morgan. *Conversations with Jesus: Getting in on God's Story; a 3Story Devotional*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_, contributing writer, Jenny Morgan. *God's Story as Told by John*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006.
- \_\_\_\_\_, contributing author, Jenny Morgan. *Living the Story: Your Growing Relationship with Jesus*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007.
- Zikmund, Barbara Brown, series editor. *The Living Theological Heritage of the United Church of Christ*. Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1998.
- Zodhiates, Spiros. *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament*. Electronic edition. Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000.